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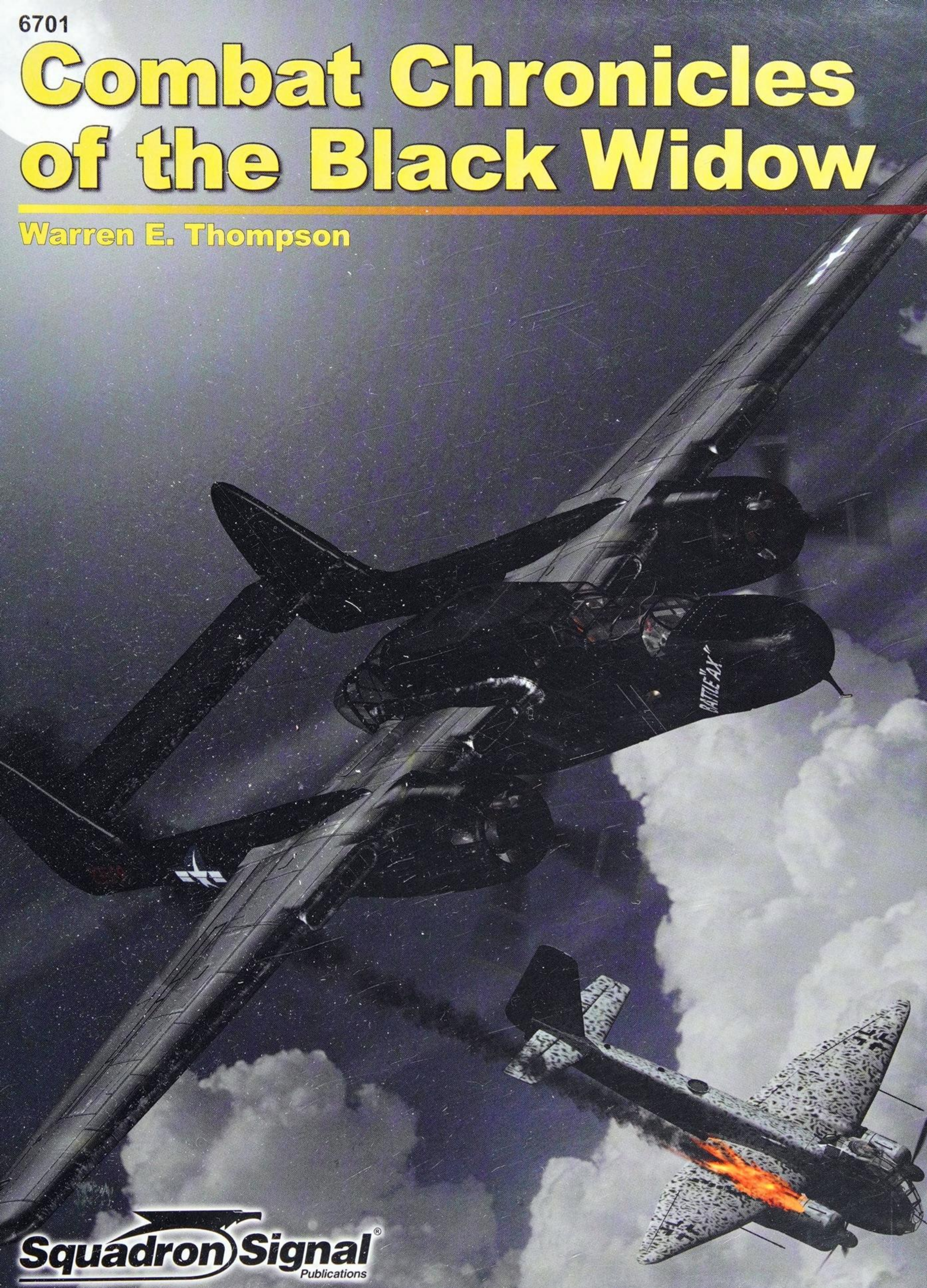
Combat Chronicles of the Black Widow

Warren E. Thompson



Squadron Signal® Publications

Combat Chronicles of the Black Widow

Written by Warren E. Thompson

Squadron Signal® Publications

Cover Art by Dave Ails

Inside Art by Don Greer

(Front Cover) Flying *Battle "Ax,"* 422nd Night Fighter Squadron ace 1st Lt. Eugene D. Axtell, downs a German fighter-bomber over France. Axtell finished the war with five confirmed kills.

(Back Cover) Flying the P-61 named *The Virgin Widow* with the 6th Night Fighter Squadron, 2nd Lt. Robert L. Ferguson shoots down a Japanese Betty Bomber. (Artwork by David Ails)

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Hard cover ISBN 978-0-89747-637-9
Soft cover ISBN 978-0-89747-638-6

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(Title Page) An early model P-61A crosses the skies over Los Angeles in this 1944 test flight. Although introduced late in World War II, the night fighter was credited with 127 manned aircraft kills before the war's end. (Northrop via David Doyle)

Acknowledgments

Thanks are due to Northrop Aviation; The Night Fighter Association; professional military aviation historians Garry Pape, Gerald Balzer, David Menard, Larry Davis, David McLaren, David Doyle, Bill Hess, Walter Boyne, John Casey, and Eric Shulenberger; P-61 Chief Test Pilot John Myers; Roy Wolford; Janice Merriweather; Porter Williamson; Brig. General Winston W. Kratz; Richard Ziebart; and aviation artists David Ails (website: www.ailsaviationart.com) and Don Greer. Special thanks are due to the late historian Martin Caiden who helped me start researching the night fighters back in 1963. Particular thanks go to 422nd pilot John Anderson who took so many outstanding photos of his squadron in Europe and to the many night fighters who for 40 years have shared with me their personal experiences and images.

Dedication

This book is dedicated to the members of every night fighter squadron and their families. Their contributions to the war effort will never be fully appreciated because of the inadequate media coverage they received. Over the past 40 years, I have talked with and corresponded with several hundred of them and in my estimation, there has never been a finer group of Americans.

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A P-61A-1 soars over the mountains of northern California in 1944. The first of these to roll off the line were in dull olive finish and a significant number of these aircraft ended up with the 6th Night Fighter Squadron in the Pacific Theater. Northrop took a lot of color pictures of the early P-61A-1s over some of the most beautiful scenery in California. (Garry Pape)

Preface

Northrop puts on a demonstration of its Black Widow's power with all guns firing. This demonstration took place at the plant at night using tracers for dramatic effect. Normally, tracers were not used in combat because they revealed the position of the P-61 and alerted an enemy pilot that he was being fired upon. (Roy Wolford)

Ever since the human race evolved into a "civilized" state, there have been wars between families, clans, or countries. This reality antedates the Roman Empire and the Medieval and Viking eras. Fast forward to the 20th Century and it is evident that conflicts still rage, only the weapons and the scope of the battles have changed. Beginning in World War I, the options for waging war were greatly expanded when the airplane was brought into the equation. It was the advent of air power that brought about the greatest change in the history of armed conflicts.

During World War I, swashbuckling fighter pilots captivated the interest of the reading public with their daring dogfights over France and Germany. U.S. involvement in the conflict greatly contributed to the incorporation of the airplane in battle tactics and strategy. After the Armistice, however, the epic carnage of the war and the behavior of some of the victor states produced an extremely strong anti-war "isolationist" sentiment among large segments of the U.S. population. Despite such feelings, ex-fighter pilots drew huge crowds with their barnstorming aerobatics and daredevil demeanor at air shows in the 1920s and early 1930s. In those peaceful years aviation's romantic aspects stole the limelight and not many people fretted about the prospect of sending the country's youth off to fight in foreign wars. The Japanese assault on Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941 sternly reminded the public about aviation's military aspect.

Strategists, however, had long been aware that the entry of air power into war was transforming the dynamics of combat. The British and Germans had come to blows long before the Japanese forced Americans out of isolation. Adolf Hitler tried to defeat Britain with an overwhelming bombing campaign in 1940, but the British Royal Air Force (RAF) blunted the offensive and exacted a heavy price from the Germans. Even then, however, most air combat was initially conducted during the hours of daylight.

When the costs of bombing England during the day grew unbearable for the Luftwaffe, the Germans switched to nighttime missions. Radar, highly trained night fighter air crews, and aircraft equipped with sophisticated gear then began to rule the night. War became a 24/7 contest that relinquished no down time. The future face of warfare was beginning to reveal itself. Although some night flying had been tried during World War I, the concept could really only begin to reach fruition in 1938, when cutting-edge German and British know-how finally permitted it.

At that time the United States was far behind the curve on night-fighting technology. While the Battle of Britain was in full swing, the U.S. Army Air Corps sent high-ranking representatives to observe the air war. The information they brought back was shocking. Both the Germans and the British were far ahead in their research and development of aircraft. Sooner or later, the American officers believed, the U.S. was going to be brought into the war and when it was, it would need to be able to cope with a modern conflict in two theaters, not just one. At the top of the list of urgent technological requirements were improved radar technology and the design and construction of a night fighter from the ground up.

The Northrop and Douglas companies came up with the most desirable designs in response to the Air Corps requirements. The meeting on the subject with Jack Northrop took place on 22 October 1940 and by 5 November, his firm was ready to present preliminary drawings to the Air Corps at Wright Field, Ohio. The drawings went through several changes and the final result was significantly different from the initial one. A formal contract was finally signed on 11 January 1941 and the future P-61 Black Widow was born. It would be the largest and most formidable fighter built by the Americans during the war, and its firepower would be second to none.

Preparing for Nocturnal Combat

A P-70, assigned to the 6th Night Fighter Squadron, is seen in New Guinea in 1943, prior to the arrival of the Black Widow. The P-61 was not ready for operational duties until late in World War II. The A-20 Havoc was converted into a night fighter and was officially known as the P-70. (Fred Secord).

Perhaps the best way to begin a book on night fighters is to explore the rigid training regimen associated with the aircraft before they were shipped off to the forward combat theatres. Air crews, naturally, received such training, but so did all of the enlisted support personnel who kept their aircraft in the air.

There was a world of difference between preparing pilots to fly combat missions during the hours of daylight and training them to fly in total darkness. Night-fighter training went far beyond that of a regular fighter pilot and it had to include the radar observer and a gunner. From the first day of training, the night fighters worked as a team.

One graphic indication of the demands of night-fighter training can be gleaned from figures cited in volume six of Wesley F. Craven and James L. Cate's comprehensive official seven-volume account *The Army Air Forces in World War II*. From December 1942 through August 1956, 35,000 day fighter pilots were trained in the U.S., but only 485 night fighter crews were trained in that same time period.

Some features of night-fighter training matched the training regimen of day fighters. The basics of flying an aircraft were largely the same. But after mastering those skills, the night fighter moved into his own world – one of total darkness and a very difficult curriculum. The emphasis was on instrument flying, night formation exercises, and night gunnery. Crew teamwork received considerable attention. Most night fighter operations were conducted with only one aircraft working a specific sector, so only on rare occasions would two aircraft operate in close proximity.

The basic concept of night fighter operations ("ops") was that each unit would function as a squadron that operated by itself under the control of a regular day fighter group or a major organization like the 5th or 9th Air Force. Early in the War, their duty was to protect Allied air fields and shipping. Later, in the War's final stages, when enemy aircraft numbers had diminished significantly, the P-61 Black Widow crews went after ground targets such as trains, vehicles, and anything else that was considered important.

Formal training began in Florida in the early summer of 1942. Since the P-61 had not yet gone into production, various multi-engine aircraft were used for training, including the A-20 Havoc, which was renamed the P-70 after being converted to a stop-gap night fighter with a 20mm gun tub in the belly and radar in the nose. Some B-25s were also used. A total of three squadrons were dedicated to night training, with the main base being at Kissimmee Air Field close to Orlando. When the Marines landed on Guadalcanal in August 1942, the Japanese exploited the fact that they had no aerial protection at night and the enemy "Betty" bombers struck them with nightly bombing raids. The demand for night fighter protection escalated, resulting in the 6th and 419th Night Fighter

Squadrons (NFSs) finally receiving the P-70 and being sent to the Pacific long before the first Black Widows would become available to them.

During this frantic Stateside training period, the demands on flying hours required of the air crews to be proficient was outlandish, considering the limited numbers of P-70s that were available. It was frequently stated that their maintenance personnel were among the best trained in the AAF due to the pressure put on them in the training command. James Cate has written that these specialized air crews were required to acquire more than 90 hours of instrument flying and about the same in the Link Trainer flight simulators but only 15 hours of actual night interceptions. By contrast, more time was required for crews to develop proficiency in working with the ground-controlled radar intercepts that would prove to be a huge factor in the activities of crews working the

Sgt. Mike Lamoreau struggles to get this aircraft back in the air, following problems with its radar. The Black Widow's radar was complicated and state-of-the-art for its time and required skilled technicians to keep it in good working order. (Mike Lamoreau)

These air crews, seen during their advanced flight training in the YP-61 at Hammer Field in California, were assigned to the 548th Night Fighter Squadron that would fly combat in the Pacific. (Art Shepherd)

This P-61B-10 was used in advanced training at Minter Field near Bakersfield, California, during the last months of the war. (Ken Jorgensen)

vast areas of the Southwest Pacific. At a later date in the program, the night fighter air crews became well versed in tactics for the intruder missions that would become the norm as enemy aircraft numbers began to dwindle in the last months of the war.

As is the case with any aircraft, the most important part of advanced training in the Black Widow consisted of familiarizing the pilot with cockpit's layout. The P-61 pilot, who had to react on instinct and in total darkness, had no room for error. According to several night fighter pilots, it took about three hours of intense concentration and study even to begin to master the cockpit layout on the P-61A blindfolded. Not only did the trainee have to put his fingers on the buttons and switches instantly, he also had to know the settings on all of the controls. In a routine cockpit check, the pilot had to start with his windscreen and canopy. Moisture could easily build up on their dirty surfaces, and in a close pursuit at night, a pilot could be thrown off considerably, Visibility could be reduced by at least 50% and anything this significant could result in fatal collisions with enemy aircraft or in being shot down by a gunner on an enemy bomber.

The sequence of check out was standard for all P-61 pilots; once in the cockpit, they had to make sure the crew chief had closed and secured the entrance doors to the cockpit area and the radar observer (R/O) had to do the same in the rear compartment. Next, they had to on all the circuit breakers and the switches on the generator panel. The only exception to this was the heater and cannon relay switches. Every instrument had to be checked for cracked or broken cover glass. Top priority was given to checks on the altimeter, pressure gauges and the fuel and oxygen tank read outs. The latter three of these items could prove to be fatal if they incorrect. The next step was to release the surface control lock, which made it possible to open the throttles and also set the parking brakes.

At that point, the pilot was in position to begin the pre-start check that would call for the cockpit to be inspected all the way around, starting from the left and moving to the right. All the trim tabs had to be set in the neutral position and the fuel selector valves had to be set to the outboard tanks while the cross-feed valve was in the off position. The feather switches had to be in the normal position while the prop selector switches must be on constant speed where they should always be kept except in an emergency. Once all of these procedures had been completed, the next step was starting the engines. The pilot would place the throttles 1/3 open and the mixture controls at idle cut-off. Propeller control levers would be all the way forward and if the flaps were not up already, they would be placed up as soon as the engines were up and running.

Making these checks in a pre-flight mode during the hours of darkness could be unnecessarily risky, so all pilots used a flashlight to run their cockpit checks. The luminous instruments on the forward panel also greatly facilitated such checks. There were four incandescent lights in the cockpit; one over the prop selector switches, another over the radio, a third on the canopy above the pilot's right shoulder and a fourth on the generator panel. There were many tasks that had to be performed before getting airborne and as far as the pilots were concerned, there were never any shortcuts. They adhered to the regimen without fail.

The key factors in all night interception with the P-61 were the radar and the R/O. Without them, the pilot would have been flying blind and enemy air operations during the hours of darkness would have been relatively safe. Lieutenant Avery J. Miller was an R/O

Pilots and radar observers from the 422nd NFS pose for a graduation photograph front of a P-70 at their training facility in Orlando, Florida. They would soon be on their way to England to fly night missions over France and Germany. Before the YP-61s became available for advanced night fighter training, squadrons flew the P-70, which was a converted A-20 Havoc. (John Anderson)

in the 548th NFS that flew combat from Saipan, Iwo Jima, and Ie Shima. Miller later revealed a few details about how the radar worked and what he had to be proficient at in order to bring his pilot in close enough for a positive identification of an enemy aircraft. While in combat, he logged 48 missions that totaled 140 hours of flight time plus eight night intruder missions over mainland Japan.

"The P-61 Signal Corps Radar (SCR-720) was installed in all production-line Black Widows. The early test models (YP-61) had a transparent Plexiglas radome that covered the antenna and the basic radar components. However, because the Plexiglas would leave the Top-Secret radar components visible, all of the combat-ready P-61s had opaque fiberglass radomes that were painted black. The SCR-720 had a rotating antenna coupled with a 25,000-volt magnetron that transmitted a radar beam at about 10cm wavelength. The parabolic rotating antenna dish served as a transmitter and receiver. A wave guide brought the radio energy to the dish for transmission, resulting in an outgoing "ping" and a return "echo" from the target."

"The radar observers had many duties that kept them busy. There was nothing automatic about the SCR-720. First came learning how to read and interpret information displayed on two different scopes. The "A" scope displayed target Azimuth (the horizontal direction expressed as an angular distance between the direction of a fixed point and the direction of the object) and the range. The "B" scope displayed Elevation and Azimuth. These radar scopes could not be seen simultaneously by the observer. He had a pair of thumb-buttons for centering the antenna search pattern up to 20 degrees left and right of the aircraft centerline and he could also point the antenna dish as much as 40 degrees up and down."

"He also had to steer the antennas left or right and up and down with the thumb-buttons while anticipating the enemy's moves and compensating for his pilot's moves. Typically, on many missions I flew, targets were lost or got away due to radar malfunctions, poor visibility, and violent maneuvers of the target or problems with our ground controllers (GCI). You have to remember that state-of-the-art World War II radar had no automatic tracking mechanisms or lock-on capability. In addition to operating the radar, the R/O was responsible for multiple radios, ground avoidance radar (radar altimeter), IFF, navigation on long, over-water flights and night intruder missions. On some occasions, the R/O with skill, could find ground or sea targets and use his radar to drop bombs on enemy targets."

Lieutenant John Anderson was a pilot in the high-scoring 422nd NFS in Europe. In combat, he flew the well known P-61A

named *Tennessee Ridge Runner*. He recalls his advanced night-fighter training in the Orlando area in 1943: "I am not certain as to how we were selected to go into the night-fighter program after basic flight training. I know that above-average night vision probably had something to do with it. Only two of my graduating class of 150 cadets were assigned to the 348th Night Fighter Squadron unit in Florida. Initially, we trained in the P-70 which was a converted A-20 Havoc that had airborne radar installed. My regular radar observer (R/O) was also assigned at that time (Lt. James Mogan) and he would stay with me for the length of our combat tour. In order to learn the ins and outs of the P-70, we were shown the inside of its cockpit to become familiar with the instruments so we could make our first demonstration flight and it proved to be a very easy aircraft to fly."

"We also had to function effectively at night and this would include landing on grass strips at night with no lights that would define the runways. It was fairly easy to master this part. Probably the most important aspect was being proficient on instruments and our check rides during this was in the twin-engine Cessna AT-17 Bobcat. It was originally a light transport that saw multi-faceted service during the early years of World War II. In the fall of 1943, the 422nd squadron was officially formed up from crews that were in the 348th training unit. From this point, our further advanced training was accrued at three different bases in Florida; one month in Orlando, followed by a month in Dunnellon and a final month at the base in Kissimmee. In the summer of 1943, one YP-61 was assigned to the 348th for testing as a night fighter and every air crew in our squadron was checked out in it. This prepared us for the new P-61A models we would receive right before going into combat. We didn't get much training with a gunner because the early models did not have the top turret, due to production problems and the fact that that turret caused some serious buffeting on high-speed pursuits. Our 422nd was deployed to England in the winter of 1943."

Second Lt. Hugh Gordon poses with all of the standard flight gear on during the advanced training period. He would fly combat with the 418th Night Fighter Squadron several months later. (Hugh Gordon)

Most of the air crews remember night-fighter tactics as being simple and to the point. Crews would be assigned a specific patrol area and that was all that was handled in briefings. As soon as they had their Black Widows airborne, they were to contact the ground controller. Once they reached their assigned area, boredom set in because of the countless hours of patrolling without any enemy contacts. However, their training stressed the point that when they were directed to an unidentified aircraft, they could not fire on it until a positive identification was made. The procedure went according to this sequence: once the ground controller spotted a "blip" on his scope (their radar had a much bigger range than the airborne units for as much as 200+ miles), they were vectored in that direction and when the night fighter got to within 8-10 miles, the radar observer in the P-61 could pick it up on his scope. Once picked up by the R/O, the pilot could be guided in close from behind and slightly below. Visual identification would then be possible and if the aircraft were hostile, the P-61 would drop back and give it a burst of 20mm cannon. After the kill, the R/O would direct the pilot back to a safe landing at the aircraft's forward operating base. This routine was followed many times in all theatres.

The 425th Night Fighter Squadron, formed in Orlando, Florida, in early December 1943, fought in the European Theatre. Sgt. George Hoover was one of the experienced crew chiefs who remained with the squadron until the war ended. He remembers the early days before they received their first P-61.

"After we got organized as a squadron, we made the long train trip across the country to Hammer Field in California for the purpose of getting the new Black Widows. When we got set up there, the P-70s were still being flown quite a bit along with the new P-61s. We stayed busy keeping the aircraft in the air as the advanced training was in full swing. Our ground crews worked long hours and we were on three days and off two, so we did have some time to relax and roam around the nearby towns. Working on the flight line with all that activity going proved to be dangerous. We had to wear goggles during that time because the spinning props could blow dirt and small rocks in your face. At this time in the war, they were doing everything they could to get several new night fighter squadrons trained and into combat. The situation in Europe was critical because of all the night battles going on in the skies over England and France between RAF and German night fighters."

"We finished the training phase and boarded a train for the East Coast. Once we arrived, in a few days we boarded the USS *United States* for the trip over to Liverpool, England. We were in a heavily guarded convoy that consisted of 15 ships, five of which were destroyers whose job was to protect us from the ever growing number of German submarines. Once we landed and got all of our personnel and aircraft together, we were ready to fight the Germans."

The 6th NFS sent a detachment over to Iwo Jima to assist in night defensive patrols. These 6th air crews are giving a briefing to General Mickey Moore (hands in pockets). To the left of Moore is Lt. Ernie Thomas and to the right is Lt. Myrle McCumber, both pilots with the 6th. (National Archives)

The P-61 was designed and built from the drawing board through early production as a pure-bred night fighter. It would not be ready for its combat debut until mid-1944, which was rather late in the war, by which time the need for a good night fighter had long been critical in the Pacific. The Marines were catching hell on night raids by Japanese bombers and only makeshift types such as the searchlight-equipped P-38 Lightning and the P-70 were available. The latter just could not reach the altitude that the Japanese Betty bombers were capable of.

The first squadron to receive the P-61 was the 6th, which was based out of Kipapa Gulch, Hawaii. It had sent several detachments to the various islands in the southwest Pacific while flying the P-70 and its effectiveness was limited at best. Squadron records show that the unit received its first Black Widow on 1 May 1944, but recorded its first kill in that aircraft only on 20 June that year.

The second squadron in line to receive the new night fighter was the 419th. This squadron had been working overtime in the Solomon Islands with the P-70. In one of the most daring single-ship missions of the war, Captain Al Lukas had successfully used the P-70 to bomb the Japanese stronghold at Rabaul. Prior to serving with the 419th, he had done a stint in night fighters with the British Royal Air Force (RAF) in Europe. These two squadrons (the 6th and 419th) were the earliest night fighter units to serve in the Pacific for the Army Air Force.

On the early morning of 5 November 1944, Captain Lukas was out on patrol in his new P-61. Twenty miles south of Noemfoor at 2:05 A.M., his R/O, Lt. John Blankenship, picked up an unidentified blip on his scope. A ground controller had vectored them close enough to the intruder to pick it up on their airborne intercept radar. Closing the gap, they were able to get a visual on it and sure enough it was a Mitsubishi G4M Betty Bomber positively identified by its exhaust pattern. It was lumbering along, totally unaware that death and destruction was stalking close behind. Lukas backed off until the distance between the two was about 400 yards and he was slightly below. The bomber's rear gunner must have been asleep because he never fired his guns. Lukas's Black Widow was an early model P-61A that had retained its top .50 caliber turret, so he had a gunner riding right behind him. In perfect position, gunner S./Sgt Glen DeForrest fired a long burst that hit home, but nothing happened and since they did not use tracer rounds, it was hard to tell where the rounds were hitting. More than likely, the .50 caliber rounds killed some the crew members that were behind the cockpit. Captain Lukas was not going to let the bomber get away, so he closed the gap even further and then let go with his 20mm cannon. Death to the Betty and its crew was instantaneous. The flimsy construction of the bomber gave no consideration for protecting its crew and the

Two P-61 squadrons shared tents with P-51 pilots based on Iwo Jima right after the island was secured. During the fighting, a nighttime *banzai* charge by Japanese troops killed several fighter pilots. Bodies of members of the Japanese suicide squad who perished in the attack lie outside a bullet riddled tent. (National Archives)

Betty disintegrated and nosed over, completely engulfed in a ball of fire. The success of this interception was based on the fact that the rear gunner of the Betty did not sound the alarm to trigger evasive action.

A short time later, another 419th Black Widow was working that same area close to Noemfoor when the pilot, 2nd Lt. James Schroth, was vectored in on an incoming intruder. As per the standard interception rule book, he pulled to within 400 yards of the bogey and identified it by its exhaust pattern as a lone Japanese Dinah twin-engine bomber. This time, the enemy gunner was alert and as soon as the Black Widow gunner put a burst into the Dinah's port engine, he returned fire and the pilot began immediate evasive action, but it had to be minimal because of the disabled engine. Lt. Schroth stayed right on the crippled bomber's tail and each burst he fired landed right on the bomber's fuselage. Seconds later, the pilot lost control and the bomber went into a steep dive, spinning all the way down into the water. It was a clean kill.

One of the top night killer squadrons in the Pacific was the 421st, which was under the control of 5th Air Force. It had flown numerous night patrols in the P-38 and P-70 prior to receiving its first P-61 on 1 June 1944. Five weeks later, on 7 July, it had its first confirmed kill in the Black Widow. One of the squadron's top shooters was pilot Lt. Carl Bjorum who scored two kills and several probables. Many of the air crew's probables were kills, but under the circumstances, it was impossible to confirm them. Most of the intercepts by the P-61s were undetected, especially in the Pacific. This meant that they got in at least one burst of 20mm which usually scored a hit. If the enemy pilot wasn't killed at this time, he took evasive action, which was usually to dive for the deck. If contact was broken, there was no way to determine if the damaged intruder ever made the long flight back to his home base intact.

Lt. Bjorum's opinion of the P-61 would probably be echoed by most of the pilots who had the opportunity to fly it: "My initial experience in firing the guns was on the tail of a Japanese bomber and I had all the confidence in the world! At that time, my total flying time in the Widow was 44 minutes, which gives you an idea of the ease of transition and straight-forward nature of the new Northrop fighter. The cockpit was well laid out with ample elbow room, excellent visibility and easy reach for gadgets and switches. Stability was excellent for night and instrument flight, an assessment that applies to the rating as a gun platform as well. Single engine performance was the best of all the reciprocating twin engine aircraft I have flown. In practice simulated engine failure on take off, I convinced myself that if there was sufficient forward speed for the main gear to leave the ground, I could climb out on one engine no matter what. That's in the P-61 with top turret and full combat load, excluding external stores such as ordnance or fuel tanks. Operating out of a dirt strip of slightly more than 6,000 feet at San Marceleno, Luzon, we often conducted our operations with half of the runway because the other half was closed for maintenance at night. This displayed a pretty impressive short-field performance."

"Once you crawled into the cockpit, locked the seat back in position, strapped in and cranked up, you had it made if you didn't have to exit the aircraft in a hurry! Bailing out of the P-61 was a

real bastard as far as the pilot was concerned. The gunner and radar observer had it made for bail-out but not the pilot. There were three exit methods, two of which might be effective. The third, from the top hatch, was not intended as an in-flight exit. Lowering the landing gear and leaving by way of the bottom hatch was one possibility. The other and only practical way involved unlatching the pilot's seat, tilting the seat backward and clawing your way back to the gunner's escape hatch on the starboard side. We had a crew bail out one dark and stormy night over Dutch New Guinea; two survived, but we were unsuccessful in interrogating the pilot as he was never found!" These comments by Lt. Bjorum were based on approximately 600 hours in the P-61A, B, and C models that covered June 1944 until March 1949, including 72 wartime combat missions in the Southwest Pacific Theater.

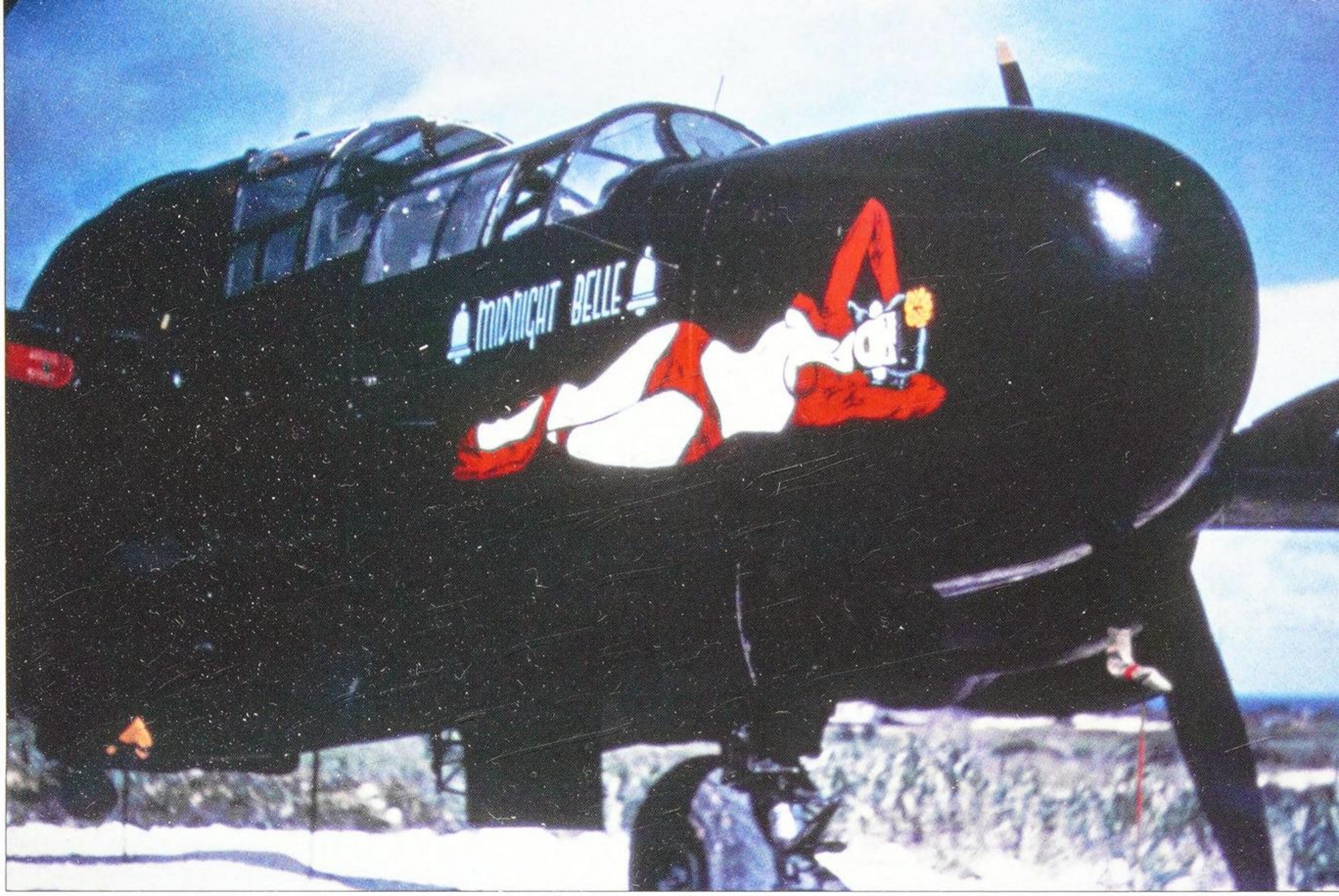
1st Lt. Arthur Bourque was only one of scores of pilots who gave the new P-61 rave reviews. He would later score two Betty kills on one night mission. He states his opinion of the Black Widow and he was a veteran pilot before going into night fighters as he flew several aircraft types with the RAF. "I believe the P-61 was the most maneuverable fighter in the sky during World War II. On one occasion I recall when I was rat racing with Captain Wayne Coyle when we were finishing up training in the 547th Squadron at Visalia, California. He was flying a BT-13 and we started head-on at 3,000 feet and re-attacking all the way down to 200 feet. Wayne was a former RAF pilot as I was and he was no slouch at the controls, but each time we tangled I got on his tail with a proper lead for a good deflection shot after hardly more than one 360-degree turn. The Widow was fantastic in its turning ability at speeds down to 90 mph!

"It wasn't the world's fastest bird though, and it took a long time to get up to top speed at altitude and I am talking about the "A" models. We didn't have the top turret in ours but the four 20mm cannon earned a healthy respect from the Japanese. They wouldn't engage us at dusk unless they had a significant advantage in numbers. Daylight missions were rare and when they happened, we usually flew in elements of two aircraft. At night, we were strictly flying as singles and there were a lot of Japanese bombers that never knew what had hit them when the 20mm rounds struck their thinly armored aircraft!"

The P-61 armorers that served in all theaters had more than their hands full because of overlapping patrol shifts that stayed up all night and as one would return, another would launch. The returning aircraft, at least those that saw action, had to have their guns reloaded and in the latter months of the war, these aircraft were carrying bombs and rockets and even napalm. All of this required a lot of work and it all had time limits placed on each crew. This was especially true for the Black Widows that were operating from Okinawa and Ie Shima, because their main mission was to attack ground targets on mainland Japan. Most of the air crews give very high marks to the maintenance and armament crews because they performed to perfection even in some of the crudest conditions at the forward airfields.

Another unsung hero for the night fighters was the gunners. They were short changed when the turretless P-61s started coming off the assembly line because they had nothing to do. However, many still went out on missions because it gave the pilot an extra set of eyes to help make the positive identification of hostile aircraft. Sgt. Jerry K. Lucas was a gunner in the 6th Night Fighter Squadron.

After a long mission, Captain Arthur Bourque of the 547th Squadron brings *Swing Shift Skipper* back to Lingayen Airstrip on Luzon, the Philippines, on 17 May 1945. (Arthur Bourque)



Midnight Belle of the 6th Night Fighter Squadron awaits its next mission on Saipan in the spring of 1945. The 6th Night Fighter Squadron boasted some of the most elaborate nose art in the Pacific Theater. Most of its art was inspired by the *Terry and the Pirates* and *Smilin' Jack* comics. (Kenn Rust)

His recollections of that period would be a generic description that would probably apply to every P-61 gunner. "I originally joined the 6th NFS as an armorer in April 1943 when the squadron was based at Kipapa Gulch, which was adjacent to Wheeler Field in Hawaii. In January 1944, I applied for Aviation Cadets and my application was returned in April because of the War Department's directive prohibiting personnel departing from our area for air crew training. I was then sent to gunnery school at Hickam Field."

"After completing gunnery school, I joined back up with the 6th and by this time, they were operating from Saipan in December 1944. Our job was to protect the B-29 base on Tinian from the relentless efforts of the Japanese to bomb it at night. Our crew (Violet 59) was composed of pilot Lt. Wilfred Robbennolt and Radar Observer Lt. Richard Phillips. Before I arrived, the 6th had shot down five Betty bombers between June and November 1944. By the end of the war, the squadron had shot down 15 Bettys and one 'Frances' (a Yokosuka P1Y1 twin-engine bomber) for a total of 16 kills. The one night that stands out in my memory was 26 December 1944. Two 'Bettys' were shot down that night by other crew members. As I recall, I was in the armament shack when I got the word that we had to scramble. Our Armament Chief drove me to the end of the runway where my pilot was ready to start his takeoff roll. By the time I climbed up the ladder and pulled the lowered door closed after me, Lt. Robbennolt was rolling at full throttle. I had only seconds to get secured in my seat.

"Ground radar gave us a vector of 090 to 20,000 feet which was north of the island. The incoming bogey was at 16,000 feet and suddenly we lost him on radar. We immediately got another vector and we lost it also. GCI was also having trouble keeping them on the scope. We landed and refueled and right afterwards, we scrambled again and the incoming bombers dropped down low and turned back toward their base, so we never got close enough for a shot. We burned 525 gallons of fuel chasing contacts. For the next three months, we were on combat patrol on most nights without any luck. However, during that period, other P-61 crews had shot down four Bettys and a Frances."

Northrop designers had done a great job of building an aircraft that could see in the dark and as a plus, the Black Widow was tough and could absorb a lot of punishment. Second Lieutenant Earl Tigner was a pilot in the 549th NFS, operating out of Iwo Jima during the latter stages of the war. At that time, there were very few Japanese aircraft in the air, day or night. But on one sunny day, a flight of four P-61Bs from the squadron was out on a routine patrol about 100 miles from their airfield on Iwo. Tigner relates the events as they unfolded. "We happened to fly over a small island that had been used by the Japanese prior to our capturing Iwo Jima. From our low altitude, we noticed a Jap Zero that had previously crashed landed on it. Our flight leader, 1st Lieutenant Bill Charlesworth, suggested that we go down and use the Zero for a little target practice. The first three Black Widows made their passes and then it was my turn.

"I was too low for a steep dive on the target, but I said what the heck! I bore down on the Zero hulk and let go with a short burst and as I let up, I realized that a recovery was going to be a little edgy because I was so low! I hauled back as hard as I could and as I started to climb out, I felt a tremendous shudder over the entire airframe.

Pilot Captain Arthur Bourque (left) poses with his R/O Lt. Bonnie Rucks by their assigned P-61 *Swing Shift Skipper* at their base on Luzon in the Philippines on 20 February 1945. The night before, this 547th NFS air crew had shot down two "Betty" bombers. The 547th was credited with six aerial kills during its combat tour in the P-61. The squadron's first kill was made on the evening of Christmas Day 1944. When the two atomic bombs were dropped on Japan, the 547th was flying missions out of Luzon in the Philippines. But on 13 August 1945, it moved to Ie Shima where it would remain until 7 October 1945. If the invasion of Japan had taken place, the squadron would have operated from captured airfields in Japan. The 547th was officially deactivated on 20 February 1946. (Arthur Bourque)

Moonhappy was assigned to Lt. Dale "Hap" Haberman (pilot) and Lt. Ray Mooney (R/O). With four confirmed kills, they were among the 6th Night Fighter Squadron's high scorers. By the end of the war, the 6th NFS had chalked up 16 aerial kills, the second-highest total among all of the American night fighter units in the Pacific, and the third-highest in all theaters combined. The 6th was the first American squadron to be converted over to the night fighter role in World War II. The squadron's first taste of combat was in the converted Douglas A-20 Havoc, which was known as the P-70. Headquartered at Kipapa Gulch, Hawaii, the squadron had numerous detachments scattered about the Pacific in New Guinea, Guadalcanal, Saipan, and Iwo Jima. Right after the war, in early October 1945, it settled at Wheeler Field in Hawaii. The 6th also had more commanding officers than any other night fighter unit. None of the 10 specialized squadrons, in the PTO/CBI could effectively stop the Japanese until the Black Widow became operational in May 1944. The 6th and 419th squadrons were the first to go into combat with the new Northrop fighter. (Dale Haberman)

The top-scoring U.S. night fighter ace of World War II was 418th Squadron commander Major Carroll C. Smith. He had five kills in the Black Widow and two other victories flying the searchlight-equipped P-38 at night. All seven of his kills are displayed on his P-61, named *Time's A Wastin'*. In December 1944, the 418th was ordered to move from Morotai to San Jose on Mindoro in the Philippines, where they were quickly replaced by the 419th's Detachment "A." Tragedy struck during the move, however, when a *kamikaze* hit and sank the ship carrying most of the equipment of the 418th. (Carroll C. Smith)

Many of the new Black Widows were sent by ship to Guadalcanal, where the 38th Service Squadron re-assembled them and then turned them over to night fighter squadrons in the southwest Pacific as seen here. Personnel are preparing to place one of the wings on a new P-61 with top turret that will be flown by the 419th NFS. The distance from the U.S. to operational airfields in the Pacific and Europe was beyond the range of the P-61's fuel capacity. So after assembly and flight testing, Northrop dismantled and crated up the P-61s for delivery by cargo ship. In the Pacific, they were dropped off in Hawaii and Guadalcanal and re-assembled for combat duty. Later in the war, the newer models, especially in the Pacific, received external tanks that gave them added range. (USAF)

421st Squadron pilot Lt. Carl Bjorum (center) goes over plans for that night's mission with his R/O and gunner at a base in New Guinea. This air crew would be credited with two confirmed kills while flying the P-61. Their squadron received its first Black Widows on 1 June 1944. The unit had been activated at Orlando Airbase, Florida, on 1 May 1943 and took advanced training in the Douglas P-70 at Kissimmee AB, Florida. After a long training period they moved to the forward areas in the PTO in early January 1944. Their first wartime operational base was at Milne Bay in New Guinea and their first experience in the air over enemy territory was in P-38 Lightnings, none of which was equipped for night fighting and most of which were aging and in need of heavy maintenance. After a few weeks flying all daylight missions in the Lightnings, the unit got some P-70s from Australia, and undertook its first night missions, all of them strafing and bombing runs against Japanese ground targets rather than air-to-air intercepts. The arrival of the Black Widows changed that picture, and records show they ended up with 13 kills in the P-61. (Carl Bjorum)

There were four P-61 pilots who came within one kill of making ace. Captain Owen M. Wolf was one of those with four kills to his credit. He also had the distinction of getting the top score of any of the members of his 421st Night Fighter Squadron. As seen here, his aircraft, displays the four kill symbols. Captain Wolf's assigned crew consisted of Radar Observer Lt. Byron N. Allain and Staff Sergeant Donald Trabing as gunner. This trio recorded the first aerial kill for the 421st NFS on 7 July 1944, when they bagged a Japanese bomber. (Carl Bjorum)

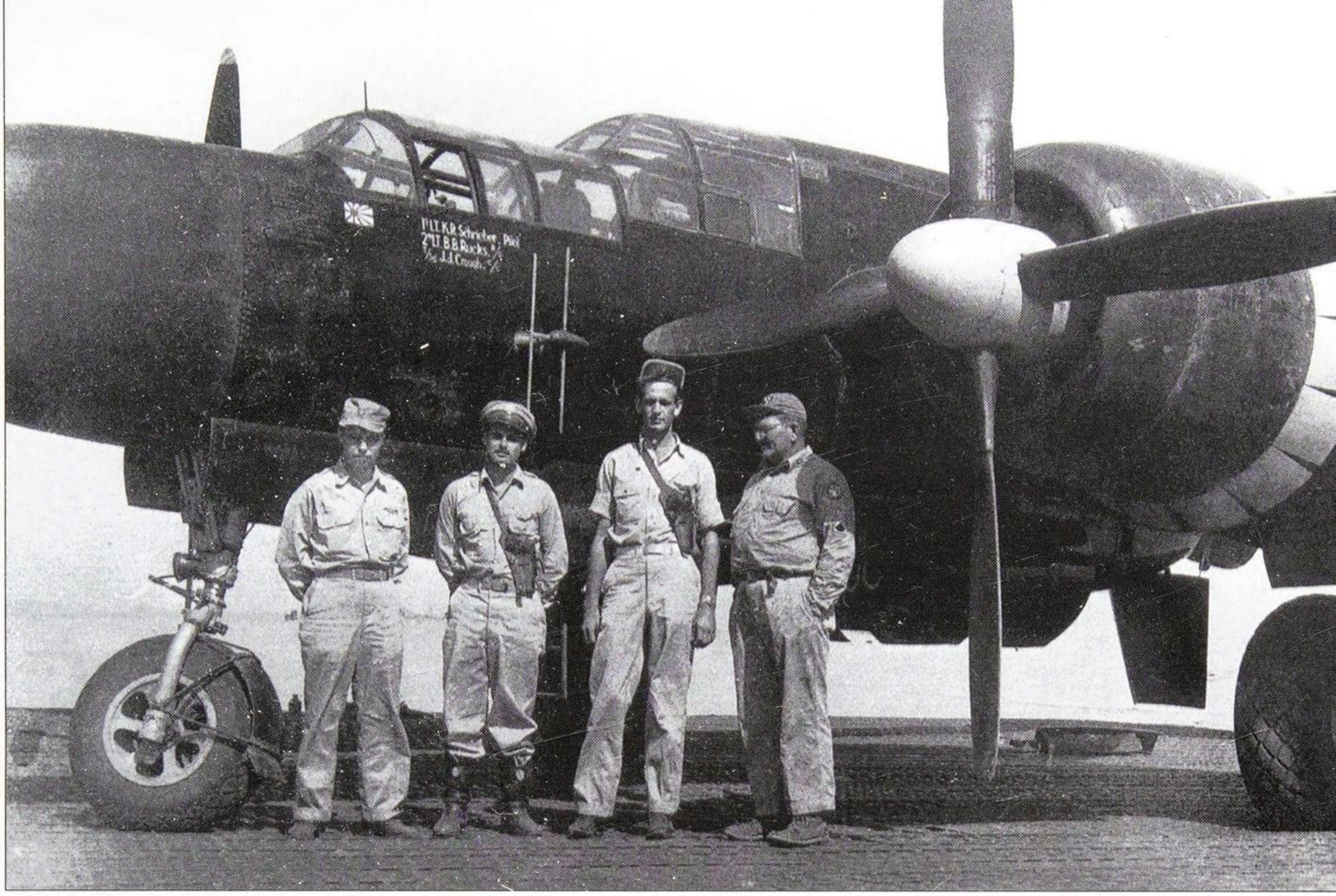
Lt. Robert L. Ferguson (right) and his R/O Lt. Charles Ward pose by their *Virgin Widow,* one of the first Black Widows received by the 6th NFS in the gloss black scheme. At the time, most of the P-61s in the squadron were painted in the initial olive drab. (Robert Ferguson)

I leveled out at about 1500 feet and looked around, but could not see anything out of the ordinary, but the buffeting continued all the way back to base. Charlesworth came along side and said he saw nothing that could be causing it. When I landed, I got a shock. The entire upper wing root fairing had left the aircraft from the stress I had put on it. I concluded that no other aircraft, but a P-61, would have withstood that maneuver so gracefully. I was very lucky! That reminded me of a time back in advanced training where I lost a canopy while pulling up sharply from a ground target. That one did a lot more damage because it resulted in a torn oil air scoop on the leading edge of the wing, one blade of the left prop beat up like a tin can and damage to the horizontal and vertical tail surfaces on the left side. Thanks to Northrop, I survived all the close calls!"

When the Black Widow pilots got to fly the YP-61 in advanced training, they were not sold on its abilities and maneuverability. Their opinion was that it was far too heavy to be an effective fighter and they would be at a distinct disadvantage when they flew against the enemy at night. They were all flying it in strict accordance with the tech orders they had received. The pilots were told to disregard those orders and to push the plane to the limit. The tech orders had been too confining and after that, things improved slightly, but it still wasn't up to the aircraft's potential. After that, there were still some serious reservations, so something had to be done because the new "A" models were about to be delivered to the forward airfields. Word got back to the Army Air Corps brass and they contacted Northrop. It didn't take long to bring in the Guru of test pilots that had led the team that first tested the "X" and "Y" models. His name was John W. Myers and his piloting talents were second to none!

Northrop's chief test pilot explains what led up to his visit to the southwest Pacific. "At the time that the P-61 went operational, the demand was so great for it that there wasn't much time to teach the new pilots the finest points in flying it. That aircraft was far more sophisticated than anything they had flown up to that time. The Black Widows coming off the assembly line were being rushed into front line operations immediately. The AAC demanded that a minimum of three squadrons be sent to the Pacific immediately. So, they put a uniform on me and told me I was to show those pilots how to extract the absolute maximum from it. The disassembled "A" models were loaded on ships and off we headed to the forward air fields. I didn't exactly know what "simulated Colonel" meant, but that was the title that the AAC gave to me. To my knowledge, no one knew I was coming, so I wired General "Hap" Arnold for a letter of introduction so I would be sure I was to be permitted to fly the Widow in those "hot" areas! Fortunately, the General notified all the right people that I was authorized to fly military aircraft at any base I was visiting. No one ever questioned a document signed by General Arnold and that meant I could fly "any" I airplane I wanted to in the Pacific Theater."

Accompanying Myers on his tour would be two Northrop Tech Reps and their primary job was to supervise the re-assembling of the new P-61A's as they came off the ships. The regimen they set was for Myers to fly the first aircraft of the new arrivals, assembled at each base. This would serve to great advantage because none of the pilots had had the chance to fly the new "A" models in a combat



First Lieutenant Kenneth Schrieber (second from left) was credited with one kill while flying with the 547th NFS. R/O Lt. Bonnie Rucks is standing to his left. They were operating out of a base on Luzon at the time of the kill. (Roy Oakes)

environment. Myers would fly with at least two pilots from each squadron and they would, in turn, show the others how to wring the fighter out. Myers continues, " Can you imagine these kids with about 200 hours in the . . . P-70 and B-25s climbing into a 30,000 pound, fully loaded fighter that had 4400 horsepower . . . taking off into a pitch black night and getting away with it? It took a lot of courage but they did it and their losses were remarkably low! Big airplane . . . big ocean . . . small island landing strip . . . and a black night! These young pilots were some of the best I have ever encountered, not only in their ability but in their training also. At the time all of this took place, I was 32 years old and considerably older than they were."

The first stop on Myer's demo tour was the 6th Night Fighter Squadron which had been pulled back from the southwest Pacific to its home base in Hawaii in order to receive the first P-61As. Myer's first passenger would be that squadron's commanding officer, Major Vic Mahr. He was a very experienced night fighter pilot who would be hard to impress. Myers had perfected a short demo that lasted only about three minutes and was designed to get the attention of any fighter pilot, regardless of experience. It began with a short takeoff, instantly climbing up to a chandelle then back across the field at an extremely low altitude . . . looping right off the deck and then performing an Immelmann. As he came out of it, he feathered the port engine then coming down across the deck again. While in the middle of this, he executed three rolls into the dead engine while maintaining his close proximity to the ground. At that point, he touched down on the runway as smooth as one could imagine. Needless to say, Major Mahr was impressed as all of the squadron personnel were as they lined the runway in amazement.

Myers adds, "It was perfectly natural that these pilots would think that a fighter that big (a monster back in those days) was severely lacking in maneuverability. Not only this, but there was great concern about loss of control in the event they experienced the loss of one engine. To counter this, I conceived the "show off" flight which met with some "wide-eyed" approval bordering on disbelief. It was used at all my demos across the Pacific. Basically, it included a take off roll that was as short as or shorter than the average fighter type followed by wheels up quickly, a sharp turn and back across the deck at red-line 450 mph. This alone, got the attention of everyone on the ground. This was followed by a loop and back down on the deck again (Immelmann). Coming out of this maneuver, I feathered one engine on the way down to the deck and then did two slow rolls off the deck right into the dead engine! At that moment, I was on approach . . . touching down and taxiing into the parking area after a very short roll. Everyone I took up was skeptical when we took off and by the time we landed, they were true believers in what the Black Widow could do!"

In the following months, the P-61 pilots began to rack up some outstanding kills and most had grown quite comfortable in the long hours of patrols in total darkness. Lt. David Corts was one of the pilots in the 421st Night Fighter Squadron that had detachments scattered out on several island bases. He had a very unique experience one night when he sighted a small light, first thought to be the light that would have been on the tip of a wing and it was flying close to him. He maneuvered around to follow the mysterious light when GCI ordered him to break away and continue his patrol. They said that there was another P-61 orbiting very close to where Corts was. When he returned to his original orbit, he received a call from the

With the 547th NFS well situated at Lingayen Gulf on Luzon, there was time for a squadron awards ceremony on the squadron's flight line some time in early 1945. The pierced steel plank (PSP) provided a smooth and stable parking area for the 547th's P-61s. (Bill Allton)

second P-61 which was also from his squadron. He was informed that the light he had noticed was not his because he was completely blacked out. At that time, he noticed there were tracers passing five feet behind and two feet below the tail of his aircraft and that certainly confirmed the fact that he was tangling with a Japanese intruder.

The odd circumstances unfolding on this mission were not over. He took evasive action and lost him, but in a few minutes, another squadron pilot reported that he had seen an enemy aircraft go down in a ball of fire into the water and explode on impact. He was just about ready to congratulate Lt. Corts on his kill, when he was told by Corts that he had not fired a single round! From what they could figure out, there had been two Japanese planes flying in formation and the one that spotted the Black Widow first started firing and in an unfortunate moment, the enemy bomber had shot down his own wingman. However, all was not lost because a few minutes later, Lt. Corts was vectored onto another bogey and when he closed for a positive identification, his gunner let go with a long burst and that aircraft went down in flames. The next day, it was confirmed that two Betty bombers had gone in, so the night's patrol ended up on a positive note for the 421st.

The 547th Squadron was activated on 1 March 1944 and after an intense training period; it was sent to New Guinea with a combat tour that covered a wide area that included all of the Philippines. The 547th began receiving its Black Widows on 7 October 1944 and its first kill was recorded on Christmas night that year. At war's end, the squadron had destroyed six enemy aircraft on night missions. The primary mission during this period was to attack enemy movements during the hours of darkness and to protect Allied ships. As with almost all American night fighter squadrons, the majority of the P-61 pilots had come out of advanced training with very little previous training in night flying. There were a few, however, who had already experienced night flying with the RAF before the United States became involved in the war. First Lieutenant Arthur D. Bourque was one of those few. He was assigned to fly the P-61 with the 547th Night Fighter Squadron and he became the top killer in the squadron, credited with two of the squadron's six confirmed kills. He had flown Spitfires and several other types of aircraft with the RAF before joining the Army Air Corps in mid-October 1942. He recalls some very interesting missions and incidents while flying the P-61 out of Lingayen Airfield on Luzon in the Philippines.

"When we were up to strength, we began island hopping, from Owi to Leyte Gulf, then to Mindoro in the Philippines and finally to Lingayen Gulf, Luzon. We had lost two P-61s and two P-38s by the time we were into Mindoro and another P-38 after getting to our semi-permanent airfield called 'Goatee' at Lingayen. It was not all one-sided though. On 19 February 1945, I was acting Operations Officer and we had all of our pickets airborne for the night, when an Army Major I had talked with about his artillery units, called on the field phone. He asked me if we could put a Black Widow up over the Jap lines so they would stop shooting at his emplacements at night. He claimed the Japs were afraid of the P-61 and that we could probably see movement below and call in strikes against them. Well, I did not have a spare crew available, but I grabbed Lt. Bonnie Rucks, a Radar Observer, and had my Ops NCO stay on the radio and call me if any problems cropped up that he couldn't handle. We took off in my assigned aircraft *Swing Shift Skipper* and we flew over the Jap lines for about an hour and a half.

"Suddenly, GCI called us and vectored me onto a bogey that was coming up from the Manila area. They continued to guide us in close enough for Lt. Rucks to pick the intruder up on his scope, which was probably at eight miles. From that point on, we had a lock and took control of the intercept until we were about a thousand feet from the target and I was able to get a positive visual identification on the bogey. With my common sense and my RAF training, I would not shoot until I knew exactly what it was! I kept

***Little Spook,* seen here resting on the PSP at Lingayen Gulf, was flown by the 547th Night Fighter Squadron all during their combat tour from Owi Island through their time on Luzon. (Geoffrey Jones)**

closing until at 100 feet, he was silhouetted in the moonlight and fire on us. The enemy pilot was taking some violent evasive action I could see the large fin and rudder that looked like a shark fin and then the red meat ball on the fuselage came into view. It was a twin-engine Mitsubishi G4M Betty bomber! I quickly throttled back to slow down and ease back into position 300 feet behind it for the perfect firing position. I followed him through a couple of mild turns, but nothing evasive"

The Betty bomber carried a crew of seven and several of these were gunners. It was a miracle that Lt. Bourque wasn't spotted and fired on when he came in close. There was the possibility that they weren't paying attention or they thought is was a accompanying bomber from the same squadron and they were reluctant to fire on it. Regardless, it was a fatal mistake on their part. Once in position, Bourque fired a couple of short bursts with no visible results.

"My third burst, a deflection shot of about 20 degrees, hit the enemy bomber between the fuselage and his starboard engine . . . right in one of his main fuel tanks! The aircraft exploded instantly in a huge ball of fire with its right wing blown off. We were close enough to our GCI unit that the controller radioed that he was going outside to watch the fireball come down. It was not only my first kill, but the controller's also. We didn't have much time to celebrate, as we resumed patrol in case more of the intruders were coming in. Sure enough, a few minutes later, we were vectored onto another target. Lt. Rucks obtained radar contact at six miles and from there, he brought me to within a thousand feet where I got a visual. It was flying at about the same altitude and speed as the first one and when I got in at point blank range; I could see that it was another Betty bomber. Dropping back, I didn't waste any time as I set up and opened fire. This time, it was slightly more dangerous that the first one as the Betty's tail, waist, and upper turret gunners opened which made it difficult for his gunners to put out any accurate fire toward us. The sky was full of tracers coming back in our general direction, but fortunately, none of them hit us. On my fourth burst, I saw numerous strikes on the tail of the bomber and return fire from its tail gunner position immediately halted."

Lt. Bourque gave the Betty a few more bursts, all of which were deflection shots. His rounds hit the bomber's fuselage and wings, setting the starboard engine on fire. Seconds later, the stricken aircraft went into a vertical turn to the left and then, to Bourque's surprise, did a half snap roll to the right. Trailing far enough behind, he was able to follow the turn and after lining his target up again, he fired a burst of 20mm into the forward area of the fuselage. He stated that he saw chunks of cockpit glass and metal flying back toward him. The cockpit area was riddled.

"At this point, the bomber pulled up in a stall to the right and rolled over until it was pointing straight down. I followed him as he continued down in a gentle spiral until he disappeared into the clouds at about 7,000 feet over the mountains. I was sure that the aircraft was in no condition to fly and that the crew was either wounded of dead and could not control the aircraft or recover it from its dive. I circled the area and my GCI; a Lieutenant Robert Bottoms confirmed that I was the only aircraft left on his radar when the fight was over. This was a very productive, yet unexpected, mission for us and we came out of it intact with two enemy aircraft destroyed."

Like many other P-61 squadrons, the 547th had other duties tacked on to its night patrol obligations. The pressure of these other assignments was put squarely on the shoulders of the ground crews because many of the Black Widows were doing double duty. The

number of Navy ships in Philippine waters at any given time, was almost too many to count. By the spring of 1945, the Japanese knew that the invasion of their homeland was imminent and that any buildup of Allied shipping was a bad omen of things to come. Therefore, what few attack aircraft they had left in those areas were concentrating on getting through to damage or sink the cargo ships. Lt. Bourque relates some interesting recollections about PT boats that were based very near them at Lingayen Gulf. The PT unit was about a half mile from where the 547th was set up, so there were plenty of chances for their personnel to visit back and forth.

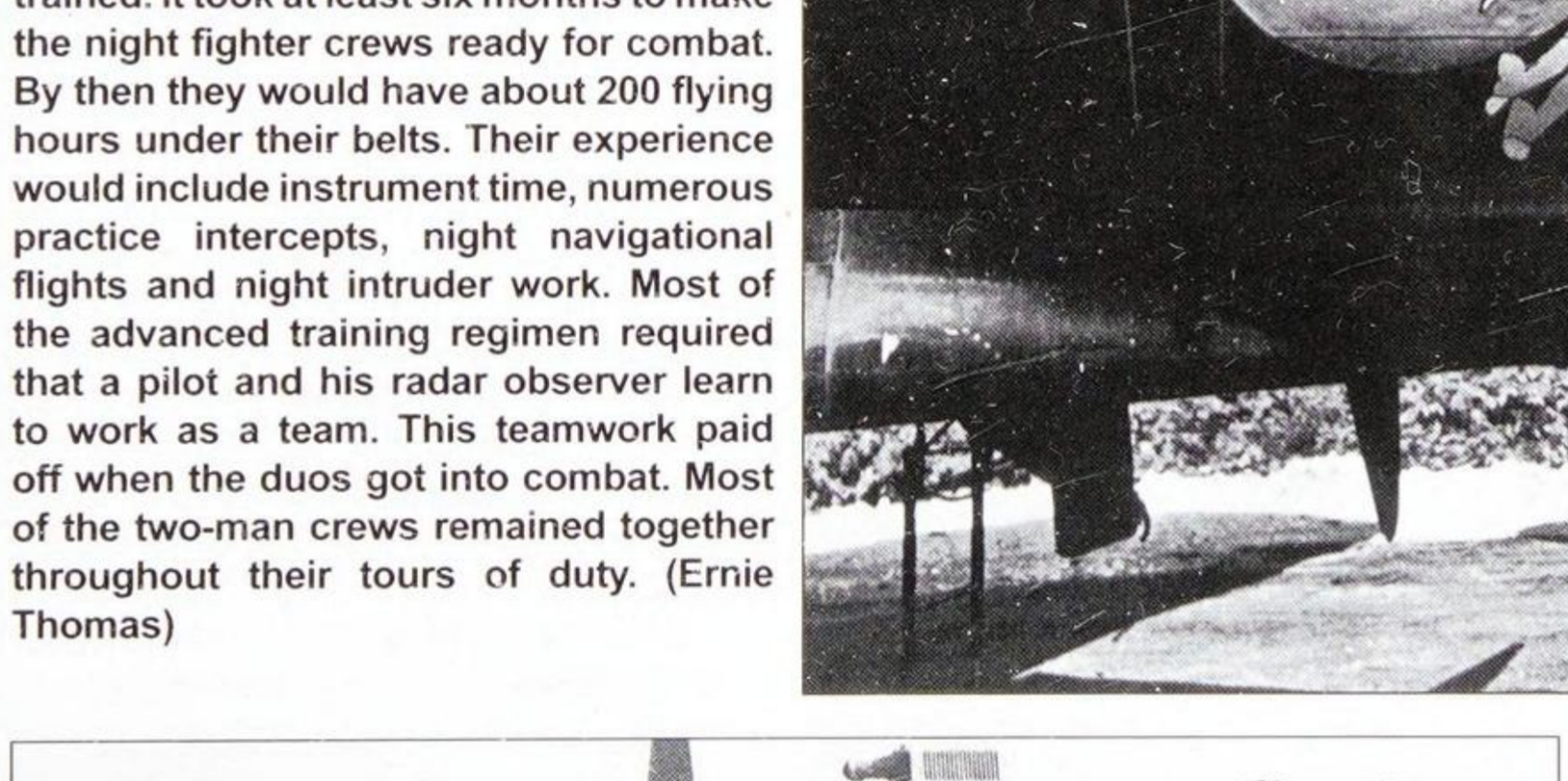
"We picked up an assignment to fly top cover for these PTs during the day. They patrolled in pairs and we usually flew two P-61s overhead to keep the Zeros off them. We would take a couple of their crewmen with us in our aircraft and a couple of our guys would go with them in the PT boats. One day, my friend Johnny Walker (also an ex-RAF pilot like me) and I had the cover assignment and flew out to meet our PTs. They headed north along the east side of Luzon, above Lingayen Gulf. About 50 miles out, we came to a small harbor at Salamogue and noted there were three small transport ships there. We told the PT boats and they said they would try to enter the harbor and put a couple of torpedoes into the ships. We watched as they started into the harbor and a Jap shore battery opened up on them with a 38mm cannon. Half inch plywood hulls of these fast boats were not designed for that kind of gunfire, so they quickly turned about and got out of range, stating they would have to pass on those targets. We replied that we could easily get those ships with our 20mm cannon and since the ships were in the water, we would not be violating General MacArthur's

Armorers from the 6th Night Fighter Squadron load a Black Widow's 20mm cannon for the upcoming night patrol. The crew chiefs and armorers were vital in keeping the in-service rate for the P-61s at such a high level. (USAF)

Major Carroll C. Smith, 418th Night Fighter Squadron commander, sits in the cockpit of his *Times A Wastin'* at a base in the Pacific. Major Smith was the top scoring American night fighter ace in World War II with seven confirmed kills. (Garry Pape)

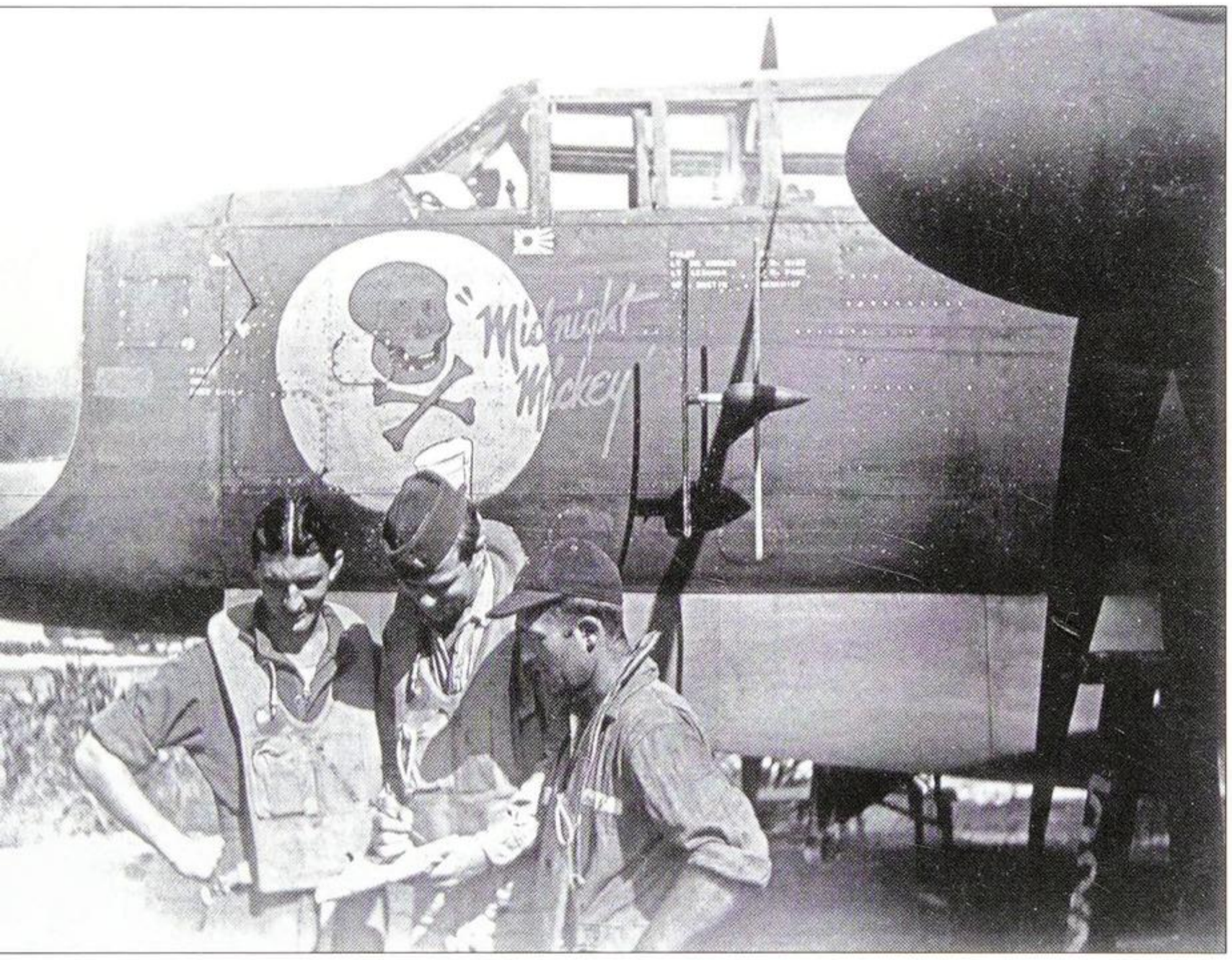
Time's A Wastin', the Black Widow piloted by Major C. C. Smith, the high-scoring 418th Squadron Black Widow ace, is seen here up close. *Smith's* R/O was Lieutenant Philip Porter. Several of the air crews have stated that on some intercepts, they experienced radio failure just as they were closing on a target. They were spotted each time and the enemy aircraft would dive down to tree-top level to escape. It was also believed that Japanese aircraft had tail warning radar that allowed them to get away by taking violent evasive action as the P-61 got within gun range. It was found that this problem could be partially overcome if the Black Widows turned off their IFF. (Royce Gordon)

Sleepy Time Gal, was assigned to pilot Lieutenant Ernie Thomas of the 6th Night Fighter Squadron and was one of only a few early Black Widows that arrived at the squadron with the gloss black paint scheme. The very early models of the P-61A to come off the production line and operate with frontline squadrons were painted in a dull olive drab paint scheme. While there were tens of thousands of fighter pilots trained in World War II, less than 500 night fighter air crews were trained. It took at least six months to make the night fighter crews ready for combat. By then they would have about 200 flying hours under their belts. Their experience would include instrument time, numerous practice intercepts, night navigational flights and night intruder work. Most of the advanced training regimen required that a pilot and his radar observer learn to work as a team. This teamwork paid off when the duos got into combat. Most of the two-man crews remained together throughout their tours of duty. (Ernie Thomas)



Major maintenance is under way on a Black Widow's SCR-720 radar at Kipapa Gulch, Hawaii. The 6th Night Fighter Squadron, which was the first unit to receive the new P-61s, used the airfield at Kipapa Gulch as its main base while sending numerous detachments into the forward areas of the Pacific. A working radar system was the key to the Black Widow's success. The aircraft's nose contained the scanning radar transmitter, which had a range of at least five miles. In many circumstances, the radar also served as a navigational aid. Once the radar observer picked up a bogey on his screen, no further help from ground radar was necessary. (Dale Haberman)

This 418th Black Widow is parked at its forward base on Owi Island, northwest of the Island of New Guinea, in late September 1944. The squadron island hopped from several bases in New Guinea over to the Philippines as the war progressed. The 418th NFS was the highest-scoring U.S. night fighter squadron in the Pacific Theater. It racked up 18 confirmed kills in the P-61. Night fighter ace Major Carroll Smith was the first commanding officer of the 418th and by war's end, the squadron had only had had two commanding officers. The unit was unique in that prior to receiving the P-61 it also flew the P-38 Lightning that carried searchlights and the B-25 Mitchell bomber. Most of the 418th's kills were made in the Black Widow, however. (Royce Gordon)



The crew of *Midnight Mickey* goes over last-minute plans for their night mission. Left to right: Radar Observer, F/O Daniel Hinz; pilot, Lieutenant Myrle McCumber, and Gunner Private Peter Dutkanicz. This crew would be credited with two aerial kills during their tour on Saipan in the Northern Mariana Islands. By the time the Black Widow air crews were assigned to a specific front-line squadron, they had been intensely schooled in night fighter training squadrons within the United States. The biggest training bases were located at Orlando, Kissimmee, and Dunnellon Fields in Florida. Well into the war, the biggest base was moved out to Hammer Field in Fresno, California. By that time. there were ample numbers of Black Widows in inventory and the crews were no longer having to train in the Douglas P-70. Most of the 6th Squadron's kills were recorded while the unit was based on Saipan. Major Vic Mahr was the squadron's commanding officer when it received its first Black Widow. (Ernie Thomas)

Three crew chiefs pose in front of one of their 419th Squadron Black Widows. They were part of Detachment A on Noemfoor Island, northwest of the Island of New Guinea, in October 1944. Left to right are Sergeants Murray, Graham, and Clancy. The squadron received its first Black Widow on 3 May 1944, but its first aerial night kill would not happen until 5 August. From the time it was activated until war's end, the squadron would have a total of 12 commanding officers (two of whom were in that slot two or more times). The unit operated, basically, with two fully equipped detachments and they were very seldom at a base where the entire squadron was together at the same time. (Clancy Collection)

The 549th Night Fighter Squadron did not receive its P-61s until October 1944. The squadron was based on Saipan and Iwo Jima for most of its combat missions. *Trigger Happy* was assigned to pilot Lieutenant Earl Tigner (2nd from left) and his R/O Lieutenant Fred Paige (far left). The 549th remained on Saipan for a very brief period while the Marines secured the south airfield on Iwo Jima. This base was critical because the long-range P-51 Mustangs needed it to be able to escort the B-29 bombers all the way to Tokyo. During the final weeks of the war, the squadron specialized in night intruder bombing and strafing missions against targets along the coast of Japan. With their loads of four 500-pound bombs or two 1,000-pound bombs, the squadron's P-61s were very effective against shipping, barges, and enemy armor. (Earl Tigner)

The air crew for *The Merry Widow* poses in front of their 549th Squadron Black Widow on Iwo Jima in the spring of 1945. Piloting the aircraft was First Lieutenant B. B. Merriam and the Radar Observer was Flight Officer Harry Brask. The squadron was one of the last to be formed during World War II. It was activated on 1 May 1944 which was about the same time that the first P-61s were entering inventory in the earlier squadrons. The squadron did not get its first Black Widows until October 1944 when they were brought over to Hickam Field, Hawaii, on a Liberty Ship that had been converted to a small aircraft carrier. As many of the night fighter squadrons had already done, the 549th set up operations out of Kipapa Gulch, which was practically in the pattern of Wheeler Field. When they received orders to move to their first combat assignment on Saipan in the Northern Mariana Islands on 20 February 1945, they were led by a B-25 across the Pacific with refueling stops at Palmyra, Wake Island, Entiwetok, Kwajalein and Tarawa. Their final base at war's end was on Iwo Jima. (Merriam Collection)

Taking a breather in their heavy work schedule, the Radar Maintenance Section from the 419th Night Fighter Squadron pose for a group picture on Morotai in the Moluccas in late 1944. The longest hours spent on maintenance were probably put in by the radar specialists. Without this system working perfectly, the P-61 was at a great disadvantage and would have to depend on ground-control radar to get a visual. The 419th's combat operations started out on Guadalcanal and ended up on Puerto Princesa on 27 July 1945. The squadron would remain at this base until early January 1946. (Al Lukas)

order to not fire on any land targets near a Philippine village.

"So, I rolled in and started a run on the larger steamship and the gun battery that had run the PT's out started firing on me. They were close and pretty well had the range. When tracer rounds are coming at you, it usually seems to be curving, unless you are very close. This stuff was coming straight at me and passing right over the top of my aircraft. I stayed right on course and let go with a burst of 20mm and blew a five foot hole in the side of the ship and it sank like a stone! Now it was time for my wingman to come in on one of the remaining two boats. This time, the Jap battery opened up and was so close, Walker yelled, 'That SOB is trying to kill me!' He kicked a little rudder, put a bead on the gun emplacement and demolished it and its crew! Then he turned on the second ship and sank it. Then it was time for both of us to go after the remaining ship which was a very pretty two-masted schooner and we blew it to pieces with our 20mm. To be on the safe side, we asked the PT crews not to mention the incident and when we landed, we removed the gun camera film and got rid of it!"

The 6th Night Fighter Squadron received all of its initial allotment of Black Widows in early May 1944 while they were back at John Rogers Field on the island of Hawaii. The 6th was the first squadron to receive them and it was critical that the new aircraft get into the forward areas of the Pacific as soon as possible. By this time in the war, the Allies had got the upper hand and were constantly pushing toward Japan, so the first stop for the new P-61s of the 6th was on Saipan. Lieutenant Robert L. Ferguson was one of their pilots and he was assigned to *The Virgin Widow* which had very colorful artwork on the nose. He gives some insight as to what went on during the squadron's rapid move from Hawaii to Saipan when he was flying with his Radar Observer F/O Joseph DeLaquila.

"Our P-61s island hopped their way from Oahu to Saipan. A flight of Black Widows would be led by a B-24 to Palmyra Island. After refueling there, we flew to Canton Island and then to Tarawa and on to Kwajalein. That left only one more refueling stop and that was Eniwetok. From there, we took off for Saipan where we would finally get into the action. To put some perspective into this long flight, our four aircraft took off on 30 July from Hawaii for Palmyra which was a 5.5 hour flight (it was located 350

The commanding officer for the 549th NFS was Lieutenant Colonel Joe Payne. *Little Joe* was his assigned P-61 on Iwo Jima and Saipan. These three enlisted men were on the maintenance crew that kept his Black Widow in good shape. (Joe Payne)

nautical miles north of the equator). The flight was uneventful, except I began to realize how large the Pacific Ocean was and how small the islands were.

"As we parked our planes, on Palmyra, and climbed out, a truck came by and white jacketed islanders took care of our baggage. We were driven to a lovely hotel, right out of a South Seas movie. This had been a regular stop for the big Pan American Clipper flights before the war started. After going for a swim, we went to a movie in the Nang Theater. Early the next morning, we left for Canton Island. During that flight, our right voltage meter was erratic, so when we landed 4.5 hours later, I asked our crew chief to check it out. He reported that most of the bolts on the right generator had loosened so all he had to do was tighten them up. He also noted that one cylinder head had cracked and that another one would be flown in from Oahu, but we would have to wait on it."

The next day, the three remaining airworthy P-61s and the B-24 took off for the next leg, leaving Lt. Ferguson behind to wait for the needed new part. A few days later, the new cylinder head arrived and was installed, but another problem cropped up in that they found out they needed a new gas line fitting. So rather than have to wait longer, Lt. Ferguson went across the lagoon to the Navy side of the island to get the part. He got it and was asked to

Major Emerson Barker taxies out from the 419th's airfield on Guadalcanal in July 1944. Barker was the commanding officer for the squadron at that time. They had just received their P-61s in May. (USAF)

stay for lunch and he couldn't help comparing the amenities on the navy and Army sides; single size innerspring mattress versus Army cots, hot and cold fresh water versus cold salt water, three choices of entrée versus C-Rations, table cloths, silverware, dishes versus bare tables and metal dishes, etc.

"We were left to fend for ourselves on the remainder of the flight, so a navigator was sent to ride with us. He had to sit on the entrance door behind the pilot and take sun shots to make sure we didn't get lost. He expressed concern about accuracy of his shots because the P-61 was not designed for celestial navigation. We decided to test the accuracy of his shots by having him making a shot on land and then making a shot in the air as we flew over the same spot. We tried this for three days and were not happy with the accuracy. We decided to rely on the P-61's radar for navigation and we would use his shots as a back up. On 11 August we left for Tarawa to refuel and then went on to Kwajalein. On the 12th, we left for Eniwetok to refuel and then continued on to Saipan. The radar kept us right on course. On arrival at Saipan, the area looked very ominous. A heavy thunderstorm had just moved through and the clouds were very dark and low hanging. The coral runway was soaked. There were large puddles of water everywhere and the surrounding land was nothing but soft mud!"

The night of 9 September 1944 was a memorable one for 421st pilot, Lt. Carl Bjorum. It involved a high-speed chase and an almost vertical dive in the relentless pursuit of a lone Japanese bomber. Bjorum's air crew consisted of Lt. Robert Williams and a gunner, S/Sgt. Henry Bobo. They had been sitting alert and at 2:25 A.M. they were scrambled to intercept two unidentified bogeys that were coming into friendly airspace. Bjorum's memory of that scramble is very clear. "The GCI controller told me to take a heading of 210 degrees while climbing up to 18,000 feet. At this time, both my gunner and I saw anti-aircraft fire coming up from Owi Island followed by four bright flashes which were probably bombs exploding at our airfield there.

"I was told to orbit north of Japen Island until the enemy bomber emerged from the line of flak being thrown up against it. Flying in the next sector was another squadron P-61 (with the call sign 'Asphalt 16') and it had spotted the same activity from his perch. Moments later, I heard a radio transmission from him that he had spotted a moving light of one of the bombers and he was closing in on it. GCI, told him to break off because he was too close to my sector and we sure didn't want a mid-air collision! But, it was too late to turn him back and in a few seconds we saw a huge ball of fire which dove straight down into the water where the fire was immediately snuffed out. 'Asphalt 16's' kill was confirmed by 421st Mission Report # 253-B-1A. In the meantime, the Jap aircraft that I was waiting on finally came out of AA range and GCI vectored me toward it. A minute later, my R/O indicated he had a bogey on his scope at five miles out. And at that time, he took over the intercept. I closed the gap at 200 mph in a climb because the Bogey was 15 degrees above us. Lt. Williams stated that his screen suddenly became cloudy which meant that the enemy aircraft was dropping 'window' in an attempt to blackout the scope. Evidently the Jap pilot knew his buddy had been shot down and figured there was a night fighter some where close by. Regardless, we still had him on the scope and continued to close 'window or no window.' At 1,500 feet, both my gunner and I were able to get a visual.

"As we closed the gap, the intruder went into a gentle diving

***Bat Outa Hell,* piloted by Captain William H. Dames, soars over Hawaii shortly before the departure of the 548th NFS for combat duty. The 548th NFS received its P-61s in September 1944 while based in Hawaii. The squadron's first combat assignment was to send a detachment to Saipan in December 1944. (Mel Bode)**

turn to the starboard from an altitude of about 15,000 feet. I turned inside the bogey and closed down to 300 feet, which allowed me to get a positive identification and it was a "Dinah" bomber. Now the time came to take him down. Sgt Bobo fired a burst with his .50 calibers and I followed up with a three-second burst from our 20mm. When I let up on the trigger, we hit the Dinah with a long burst of machine gun rounds. All of these were from dead astern. The severely wounded bomber went into a steep diving turn to port and I kept right on his tail in an almost vertical dive and then things got a little scary. I was about 600 feet behind him and my airspeed was slightly past 400 mph and I realized I might have trouble pulling out in time, so I yanked back on the yoke. I almost blacked out and I think I was about 5,000 feet when I started to climb back up and I was at 10,000 feet before I managed to level off."

Both Lt. Bjorum and Sgt. Bobo saw a sudden bright flash which was probably their Dinah hitting a small island below and exploding. "Asphalt 16" reported he saw the same explosion from his perch next to Bjorum's sector. The next day a patrol on Japen Island found the wreckage of the Dinah which confirmed the kill. Just minutes after this encounter, GCI located another intruder on their scope. Lt. Bjorum was vectored toward it, but was never able to get close enough to get a lock on Lt. William's scope. The next day, his armorer said that the Dinah kill had expended 200 rounds of 20mm and 1,000 rounds of .50 calibers.

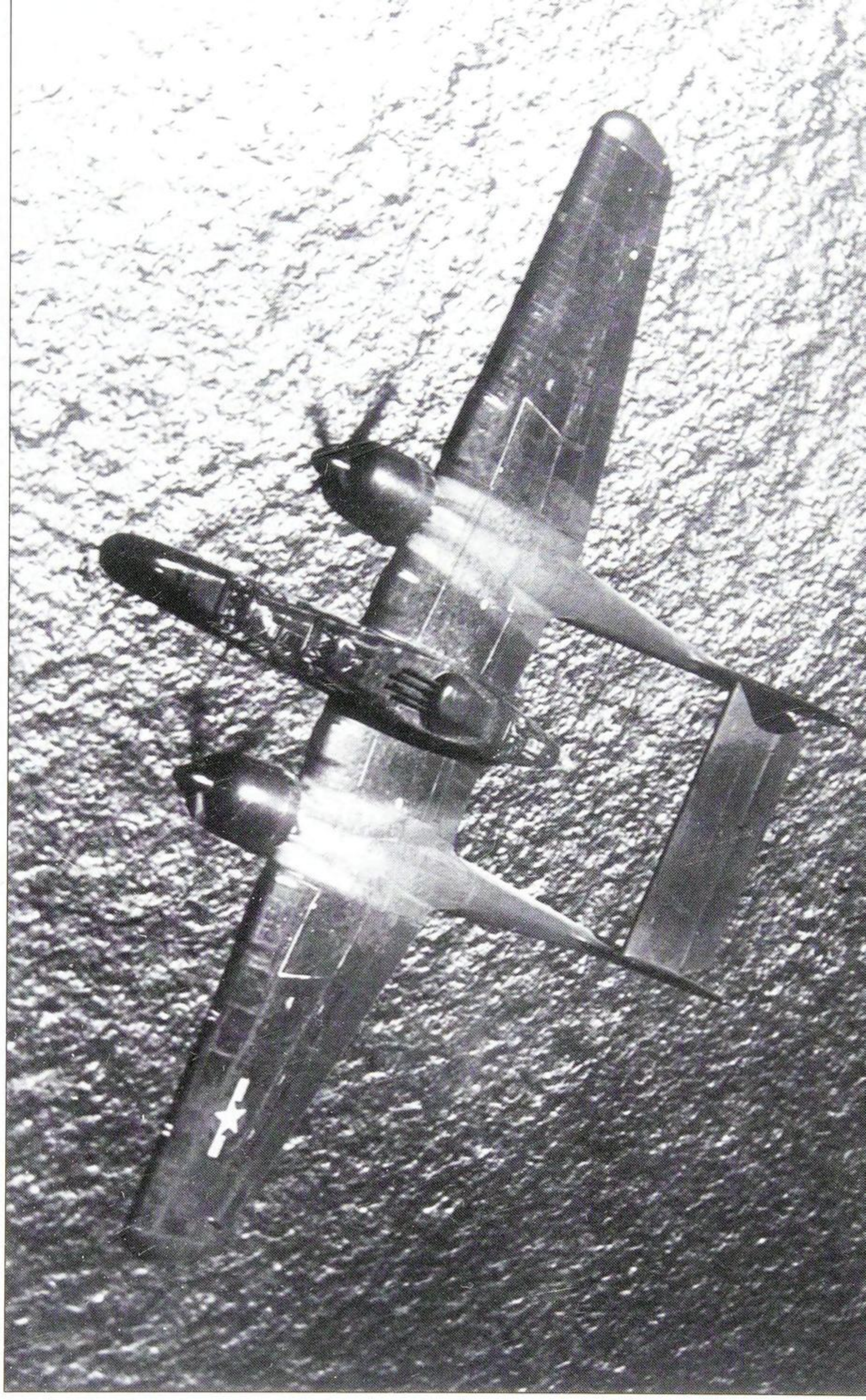
The Japanese night attacks against Allied assets on Saipan were relentless. On Christmas night 1944, they came in large numbers and the 6th Night Fighter Squadron was ready for them. When the sun finally came up, five enemy aircraft had been shot down. Pilot, Lieutenant Robert Ferguson was one of the 6th Squadron pilots that were involved in the melee off the coast of Saipan with his Radar Observer Lt. Charles Ward. Ferguson recalls the events as they unfolded

"We scrambled at 2200 hours. Our *Virgin Widow* was sitting across the runway from our Ready Shack and it was already set up with all our flying gear, helmets, oxygen masks and parachutes. We were driven in a jeep to the plane. As I climbed into the pilot's seat, my crew chief, S/St. Joseph Chmura, secured my shoulder harness in place, closed the canopy and entrance door. By 2204 hours, we were in the air, reporting to control that we had one "Charwoman" airborne. GCI gave us the directions toward an unidentified intruder coming our way at 20,000 feet. When we were about 40 miles north of Saipan at 17,000 feet, Lt. Ward said he had a radar contact on

his scope at a distance of seven miles. The target was starting to descend and we were overtaking it rapidly. We slowed down to 120 mph and we were still closing too fast so I dropped the flaps to cut the closure rate and my R/O told me to make the hardest possible 360 degree turn and this caused us to lose another 6,000 feet of altitude. This was repeated a second time and we lost another 6,000 feet. Then a third time and this time I leveled off at 1,500 feet. I was concerned that we were trying to intercept a surface craft and did not want to fly into the water. At 1,500 feet, the target became lost in all the ground clutter and when we last had him, he was below us at minus 5 degrees!"

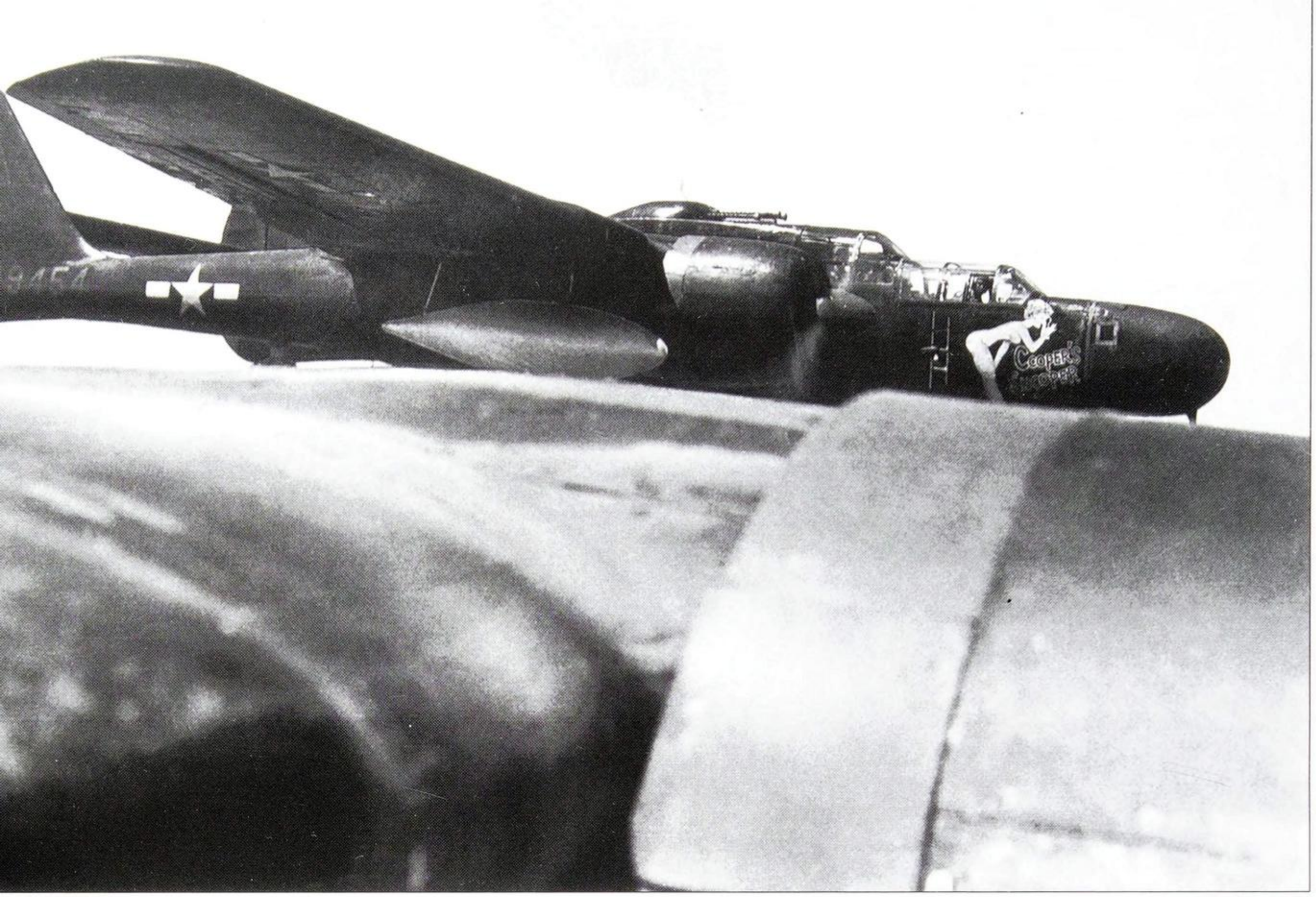
It didn't take long for Lt. Ferguson to get another vector, this one at 15 miles out and 10 degrees below. It proved to be a surface craft and control directed Ferguson to steer 010 and go to 15,000 feet. There was a lot of Japanese activity, but *The Virgin Widow* wasn't having much luck. The next contact came and Ferguson started for it, but GCI called him off, because another of our P-61s was much closer. Minutes later Ferguson got another vector. This intruder was at 45 miles, flying at 10,000 feet. Suddenly, the target climbed to 15,000 feet and was only five miles ahead and slightly above them. The overtake speed was about 45 mph.

"When the range was down to 2,500 feet, I put the flaps down and reduced my airspeed at least 50 mph and the target started pulling away. When that happened, I pulled up the flaps and closed to about 1,200 feet where I got a visual. We continued to close to 300 feet identifying the target as a Betty bomber. We pulled up level with him and fired a short burst into its port engine and fuselage. We observed a small explosion in the fuselage and the red glow of a fire inside just behind the wing. At that time, we made a sharp turn to port and throttled back to avoid overshooting. We flew alongside the bomber, trying to slow down enough to get behind it once again and get in another few rounds of 20mm. The Betty continued to drop airspeed and lose altitude. It was now burning profusely from the waist all the way back to the tail section. The nose dropped down and it went straight into the ocean, exploding on impact. We called GCI and were directed to steer 230 after a possible bogey but it proved to be a surface craft. Returning to base, we landed at 0240 hours. After our P-61 was checked over by our ground crew, we found out we had expended a total of 100 rounds of 20mm with all four of the guns firing. *The Virgin Widow* was a virgin no more. The next day, Sgt. Miozzi, my gunner, drew lines through the word "*Virgin*" and put a ring on the *Widow's* left hand."



One of the 548th Squadron Black Widows makes a rare daytime flight at low level over the Pacific close to its home field on Saipan sometime in February 1945. This was probably a maintenance flight before the upcoming night patrol. (USAF)

There were a few instances where the Betty bombers were escorted by a single fighter and due to the darkness and the fact most of the Zero or Frank pilots were not trained in night flying, they stayed in very close to the bomber. This posed a serious problem for the GCI people because they would call out the vectors to the patrolling P-61s to intercept a lone intruder when actually there were two aircraft. They were so close together that they showed as only one aircraft on the scope. One of the 6th Squadron pilots closed on a Betty



Cooper's Snooper, a Black Widow assigned to pilot Lieutenant George C. Cooper, flies in formation with another of the 548th NFS P-61s off the coast of Iwo Jima in spring of 1945. (Mel Bode)

bomber and quickly fired a long burst with his 20mm and the target burst into flames and plummeted down. When the pilot reported his kill, GCI said that they still had a blip in front of the P-61. It was the fighter escort and the Black Widow air crew had no idea that it was there. Evidently it showed up as one on their AI radar and once the firing started, the fighter escort made a sharp turn to get out of the way and was never known to the R/O. The escorting aircraft were never shot down as they probably dove straight down close to the surface and were not showing up due to ground clutter.

The highest-scoring American night fighter ace was Major Carroll C. Smith, the commanding officer of the 418th NFS. He was replaced as C.O. by Captain William B. Sellers in February 1945. He and a few of his senior pilots and Radar Observers wrote some key data on what was required to be a successful team in the air and other comments pertinent to being effective on intercepts and intruder missions. Captain Sellers comments on the importance of the ground controllers that the P-61 crews had to work with.

"In addition to the two men in the Black Widow, we have found that the GCI controllers are a very definite part of the night fighter team. After you have flown with a certain controller for a period of time, you begin to have more confidence in him. He sits in on your bull sessions and each team knows him like a close classmate. This getting acquainted and gaining confidence period does not come overnight. Therefore, in my opinion, the efficiency of a squadron can be maintained on a higher level, if no change in controllers is made. When the squadron moves to another base, the controllers should also move with them. The ideal situation would be to have these controllers as permanent members of the squadron."

Once contact is established in the airborne intercept radar in the P-61, the communications between the pilot and his R/O is critical to the outcome of the intercept. 418th Squadron pilot Lieutenant Albert Sorbo adds his comments about the pilot/radar observer team. "First of all, this duo should have a complete understanding of each other's methods, which should be consistent. For example, the pilot should establish a fairly definite rate of turn for gentle and hard turns; otherwise, the R/O may be confused at times whether to use a hard or gentle turn and jinking might be the result, which is very undesirable at close range to a potential target. They should also agree on the phraseology to be used during interception as it should be brief and easy to understand. In changes of altitude, I prefer the R/O to say 'Go down,' or 'Go up,' as it is curt and readily understood. The words 'increase' and 'decrease' we use exclusively for airspeed. As for turns, I prefer the use of 'left' or 'right,' as I am less apt to get confused and seem to react more quickly than I do to 'port' or 'starboard.' Every crew will have its own preferences, but when agreed upon, should be adhered to at all times. I have never experienced any confusion using the method just mentioned and have found it especially helpful if the radio wasn't working well when, by catching a single word of the R/O's command, I could pretty well guess what he wanted.

"Another helpful habit to acquire, I found, was for the pilot to repeat back to the R/O every command he was given. On various occasions it was the means of correcting a misunderstanding on my part almost instantly. Repetition may also prevent the pilot from absentmindedly turning right when he is given a turn to the left, etc. Speed of interception is largely determined by the terrain, whether

Lady in the Dark is probably one of the most photographed Black Widows in the Pacific Theater. The pilot (2nd from right) is Captain Sol Solomon (who later changed his name to Lee Kendall). The R/O (far left) is Lieutenant John Scheerer. (Lee Kendall)

Ie Shima, a very small island close to Okinawa, is jammed with many types of aircraft during the final weeks of the war. Aircraft of the 548th NFS, shown here, operated from this base beginning in mid-June 1945 until after the war ended. (National Archives)

mountainous, flat or water. Over open water, where ground control is good, there is more time to make the interception; but over or near mountains, the interception should be made as quickly as possible. The Japs seem to know the effects of ground scatter on the scope and make use of this handicap whenever they can. On one occasion we were in contact with an enemy aircraft that was aware that night fighters were in the air. When we tried to close in, he dove sharply to a low altitude at the same heading for some rough terrain nearby. We followed him and when he got down low, he made a sharp turn and we lost him on the scope.

"In most of the chases, we have closed in at full speed when the target was flying fairly straight and level, to within several thousand feet before throttling back. I always try to determine from the R/O's range readings how fast our rate of closure is and if I think it's necessary, begin to throttle back before the R/O says so. I don't think the pilot should have speed control entirely determined by the R/O. Once we are close to getting close enough to make a positive identification and get in firing position, I like to have the R/O call out the azimuth, elevation, and range at close intervals so I know exactly where to look for a visual. On one interception, we closed in too fast on a bogey that was using evasive action and I got a visual while he was in a diving turn. He saw us before I could fire and dove sharply to minimum altitude. In this case, the intruder was heading toward his target so we had no time to lose. Being over water, we managed to follow him down and as he was heading away from his target, we stayed well behind. For about 10 minutes, he made continuous 'S' turns at minimum altitude at full speed. At all times, I was within one hundred feet of the water trying to stay below him. Finally, the Jap pilot must have thought he had shaken us off, for he slowed down and began a straight climb. Then it was very easy to close in behind, line him up and make the kill."

As the night fighter squadrons rapidly advanced to newly captured airfields, there were incidents where only part of the runways were secured from enemy snipers, especially in the Marianas. One report stated that as a P-47 squadron and a detachment of P-61s moved in, only 2/3 of the runway was safe. The runway was only 3,000 feet long which meant that the Black Widows were landing and taking off from 2,000 feet. They would land slow with full flaps and hit the brakes before they moved into the Japanese infested area. Enemy snipers would take pot shots at the aircraft, but the P-61s were never hit. The P-47s suffered numerous hits and on one occasion, the enemy moved into their parking area, at night, and slashed their tires with bayonets, fired numerous rounds into the gas tanks and threw grenades into the parking area. It took several days to secure some of the air strips on some of the islands completely. The worst example of this happened on Iwo Jima before the island was secure. During a nighttime suicide attack several P-51 Mustang pilots were killed while sleeping in tents. Marines wiped out all of the attackers, but not before they had done a lot of damage.

For the squadrons operating out of the Philippines, there was very little enemy air activity at night between March and June 1945, so the number of chances for kills dropped considerably. The 547th Squadron continued its nightly picket patrols and a few top cover daytime missions to protect PT boats. Most of the activity was on the ground between Allied troops and the Japanese and by this time the Japanese had decided to make their last stand holed up in the original walled city, called Intramuros and on the island of Corregidor. Lieutenant Art Bourque, with the 547th, adds some comments on that period. "At this time, the bombers based on various airfields in the Philippines were sent out to strike targets

on the main Japanese islands and Okinawa and Formosa (Taiwan). There was one target on Formosa that was giving our aircraft fits. It was a heavily guarded alcohol plant that made gasoline for the enemy. It was located in a town called Tima, just south of a major Jap airfield. Our bombers ran into so much resistance from anti-aircraft batteries and enemy fighters that they just could not get through to destroy the facility.

"Fighter Command asked us to send one P-61 to see if we could get through to the factory, but it was turned back for the same reasons. On June 28th, our Operations Officer got a call from HQ to send three of our Black Widows to attack the refinery. I volunteered to go it alone, but orders were orders and two more pilots stepped up including our Ops Officer "Wimpy" Stein. We suited up and briefed for takeoff later in the day. We would be loaded with napalm. As we approached Formosa, I kept us below 500 feet and off to the right of the island, taking cover from the mountain range that ran along the island coast and this shielded us from Jap radar. Our plan was to make it a surprise attack with little or no warning to the defenses, so we flew well past the middle of the island before turning inland. Once that was accomplished, we headed south straight to the target area. We encountered no anti-aircraft fire and as we approached the facility, I had a Jap 38mm gun off a bit to the right, so I fired at it and destroyed the gun and its crew.

"Then approaching the refinery building, there was a large opening on the second floor which housed a 38mm gun emplacement. I also fired on that gun and wiped it out. Then, pulling up to go over the top of the building, I released my bombs and then immediately started to turn to cover the other two P-61s on their bomb runs. "Wimpy" Stein made his run and started his pull up before releasing the bombs. As a result, the napalm went clear over the top of the building and landed directly onto the powerhouse! Perfect!! In the meantime, my bomb had started a large fire in the building and the third pilot, Gene Freeman" made his run. As he pulled up over the building, he radioed that his bomb did not come off. I told him to make another run, which he did, but the same thing happened. I told him to reach along the right side of his seat to a panel full of a row of switches and see if the very last switch was up or down. He said the switch was down, so I told him to put it in the up position and make another run.

Serving with the 548th Squadron, pilot Captain James Bradford (standing left) and his R/O, Lieutenant Larry Lunt (standing right) pose with their ground crew on Ie Shima. Their P-61, named *Midnite Madness,* featured elaborate nose art. (James Bradford)

That switch was the master bomb arm switch. He made the run and his bomb came off without any further problem"

By the time Freeman's bomb had hit, the factory was a blazing inferno and all three of the Black Widows joined up and headed south, flying very low. They had to cross over the Japanese airfield, so they got down about five or six feet off the runway which made it impossible for the enemy gunners on either side to fire. It would have been suicide for them because there were aircraft parked on both sides and that is also where the gunners were positioned. They did not fire, so the mission was accomplished with only three aircraft and they didn't get a single round fired at them. The strike was so quick that the pilots at the airfield did not have time to man their aircraft and launch. The next day, photos taken by a photo-reconnaissance aircraft showed that the refinery had been totally destroyed. Chalk up another perfect mission for the 547th.

During the late fall of 1944, the 418th Night Fighter Squadron had a detachment on Morotai. One of the pilots pulling this duty was Lt. Bertram C. Tompkins whose Radar Observer was F/O Vincent Wertin. They shot down a Japanese float plane while on a night intruder mission. Lt. Tompkins recalls the details of what was going on at that time in the war and what occurred on that mission. This crew had had a lot of experience flying night missions in B-25s with the squadron, immediately before they got their Black Widows.

The 547th NFS spent seven months based out of Lingayen Gulf airstrip in the Philippines. On 13 August 1945, just days before the war ended, the squadron finally moved over to Ie Shima to prepare for the invasion of Japan. (Frederick Hill)

"While we were operating out of Morotai, the Japs used many methods to counter us at night. They used 'window' quite a bit, especially from the bombers, and it proved to be effective at first, but our radar operators soon overcame any advantage it had given the enemy. 'Window' seemed to jam the GCI scope much more than it did our airborne radar on the aircraft. In the areas that we were working, the Japs used float planes a lot. They would come in range first and draw our P-61s out, so when we would follow them out, their bombers would sneak in the empty space without any interference. After we were lured out, the float planes would land on the water and wait for a period of time, undetected and then take off and return to their base. By this time, the bombers had come in, dropped their bombs and exited the area safely.

"Our Intelligence guys were certain that the Japs had GCI on the tip of Halmahera Island and thus directed their bombers to their targets while keeping them away from our patrol positions. There were several instances when our radios went out and we couldn't get any vectors from GCI. On one night while patrolling over Morotai, our radio went out just as the Japs were coming into our area. We free-lanced and picked up a few targets, but every time we got within 3,000 feet, the bogey would make a hard turn and drop down on the deck. I believe all of their bombers had some type of tail warning device installed on them. After that night, when we picked up a bogey, that was about a mile out, we'd turn off our IFF and they quit initiating evasive action. One night we were vectored in by GCI on an intruder. We took over when we first got him on the scope at about seven miles. I closed to about 3,000 feet and we got a visual on the exhaust flames and believed it to be a twin-engine bomber. We continued to close too fast and at 500 feet, we discovered that it was a float plane. Realizing that we were going to overshoot, I did a tight 360-degree turn and went in again, only this time much slower. My R/O read off the closure distances and when we got down to 800 feet, I opened fire and shot it down. With those 20mm, he never knew what hit him!"

The author could find only one incident where a P-61 bumped or collided with an enemy intruder in the dark (422nd Squadron in Europe), but there were a few close calls. Usually, when the pursuer got too close, the enemy pilot initiated violent evasive action and many contacts were lost this way, especially if they dove down to the deck. Many pilots reported that they came very close to running into the rear of a slow moving Betty bomber, but very, very few came as close as Lt. Malcolm L. Ritchie and his Radar Observer F/O Vincent Wertin on the night of 27-28 December 1944. They were in one of the early patrols for the night (1815 hours) over Mindoro Island. If everything went according to plan, they would finish their patrol at 2130 hours. F/O Wertin explains the details of what happened. "At 2030 hours, GCI informed us that there were several unidentified aircraft headed into our area. We were given a 180 degree vector and a distance to the nearest contact of about 4.5 miles. At that time, I made contact on my scope. I brought my pilot to within 3,000 feet, at which time the Jap plane made a very hard turn to port which took him off my scope. I looked out the side and saw the bogey about 90 degrees port.

"I told Lt. Ritchie and he immediately followed him and we were able to come in from behind again and closed to 2,500 feet where we got a visual. We continued to move in to about 300 feet behind the Betty before one of its gunners opened fire. Ritchie didn't let up and we continued to close before firing a short burst of 20mm. At

The 421st Squadron was very successful in the Pacific, with a total of 13 kills in the Black Widow. The squadron moved to Ie Shima just days before the war ended. The long range tanks that allowed the aircraft to range out on night intruder missions can be seen in this photo taken shortly after arrival on Ie Shima. (John Chew)

that point, we came to within five feet of the Betty's tail and Ritchie pulled up sharply to avoid a collision. We trailed back some and we fired another burst and at that time, the Betty exploded and went spiraling down in flames and we followed. It hit the water on the northwest side of Anbulong Island." If the Betty had exploded on that first burst from the Black Widow in so close, they would probably have gone down also.

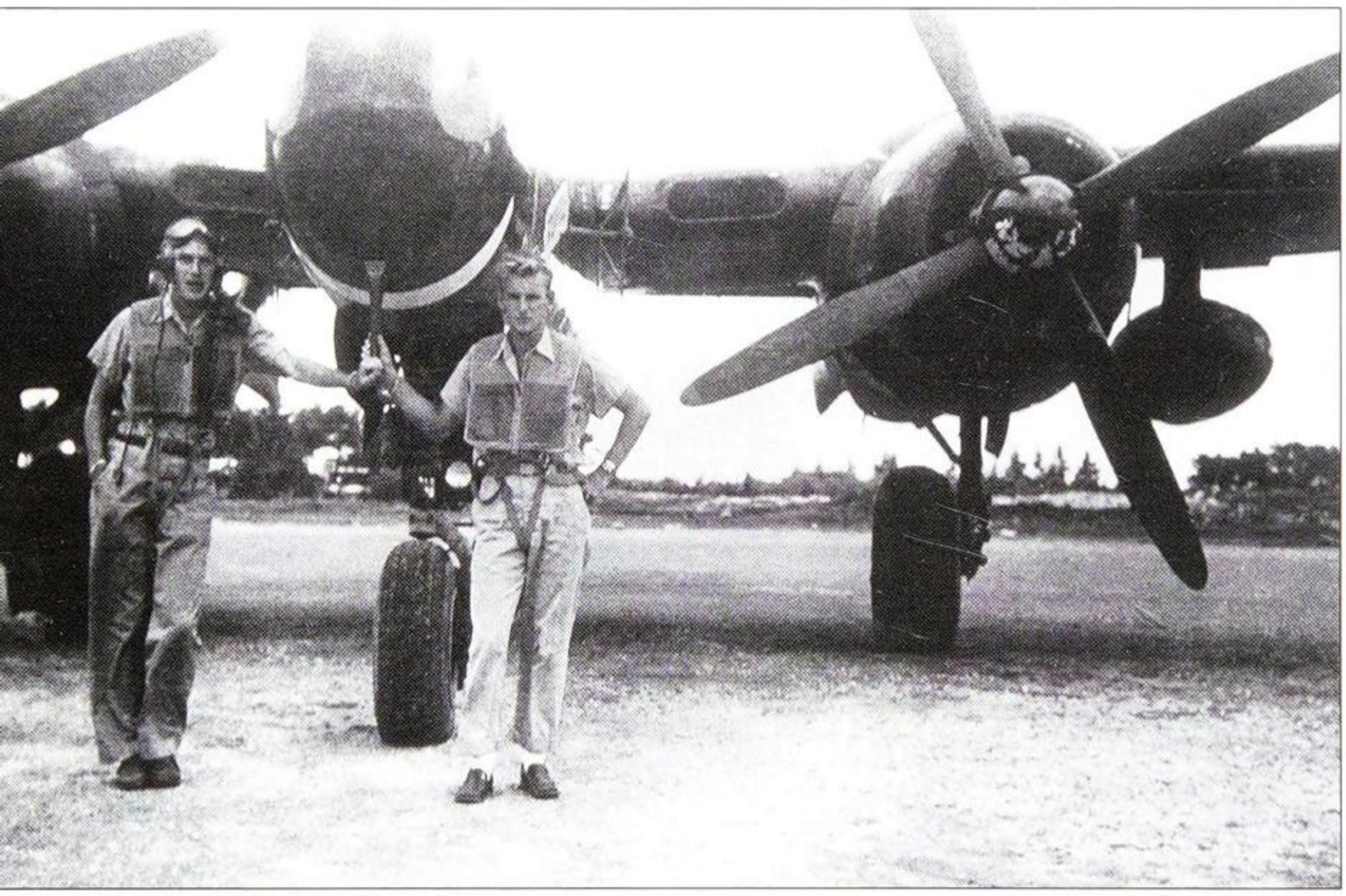
The night fighter "Ace of Aces" for the Americans was Major Carroll C. Smith, commanding officer of the 418th NFS in the Pacific. He and his Radar Observer Lt. Philip B. Porter would net five kills while flying the Black Widow and before that, Major Smith earned two more kills and two probables while flying P-38s equipped with search lights. All of these were accomplished while serving with the 418th Squadron. What was particularly amazing about this feat was that four of the kills made by his P-61 *Time's A Wastin'* happened on the same night. This one-night total tops what Lt. Robert Bolinder did with the 422nd Squadron in Europe when he shot down three German aircraft on the same night. At the time of this mission, the 418th had just moved its flight operations to San Jose, Mindoro, in the Philippines which carried a lot of responsibility on night protection because of the massive fleet of Allied ships that were in the area. They were a prime target for night attacks by the Japanese. This spectacular mission took place on the night of 29-30 December 1944.

Major Smith relates the details as he remembers them. "This particular night there was no moon with broken clouds at 6,000 feet. We were on the seaward side of a big convoy and radar on one of the ships was controlling us. Suddenly, they picked up a possible bogey and gave us the directions for the intercept. Lt. Porter brought us on in close enough to get a positive identification which proved to be a twin engine aircraft known to us as an "Irving" (A Nakajima J1N1 twin-engine aircraft flown by the Japanese Imperial Navy; code named "Irving" by the Allies). I moved into the best firing position, which was trailing and slightly below. I fired a quick burst that was dead on and the bogey immediately burst into flames, nosed over and went straight down into the water. At that moment we were directly over our ships and it provided some good entertainment for the men down below."

"For some reason or another, the Japs were relentless in their efforts to reach our ships and we happened to be in the right place at the right time. GCI came on the radio with another vector. He was close so we were on it in minutes. I got close enough to confirm it was another "Irving" just like we had shot down minutes before. I lined up in the same position behind him and let go with another burst and the same thing happened; it was engulfed in flames and went straight in. From that time on until our patrol was over, it was uneventful, so we returned to base with two confirmed kills under our belt with easy confirmation because of all those that witnessed it."

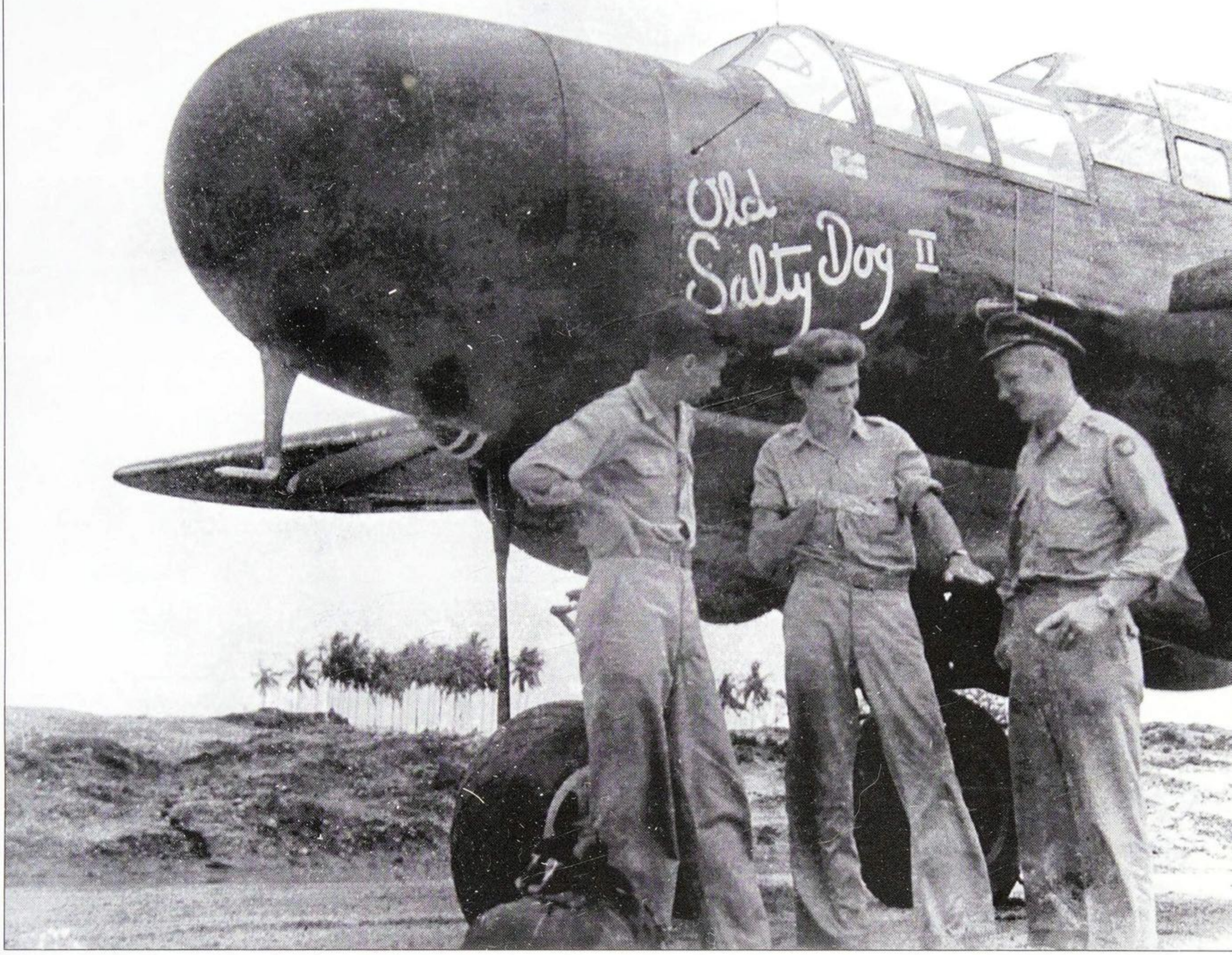
It had been a long mission and both crew members were looking forward to getting some rest, but with all the activity going on in the area, that would not be the case. Once Major Smith landed and taxied into his parking space, he was instructed to stand by for take off again as soon as his Black Widow was refueled. Most all the maintenance crews were standing by and it didn't take long to turn the P-61 around. There was no time to re-load the ammunition,

These 548th air crews compose "A" Flight on Ie Shima in the summer of 1945. In the back row are the pilots. The middle row is made up of radar observers, and the gunners are seated in front. *Bat Out 'A Hell* was the second version of artwork painted on the second *Bat.* The squadron was activated on 10 April 1944. Most night fighter units were formed about 30 days apart, with the last one (the 550th) forming up on 1 June 1944. By the time the 548th got into the war on Saipan in the Northern Marianas in mid-December 1944, the front was advancing rapidly toward the Japanese home islands. The squadron did manage to get into the action, however, when it moved to Iwo Jima soon after the Marines had secured the airfields there in early March 1945. By war's end, the squadron had scored five aerial kills. (Robert Boucher)



Pilot Lieutenant Mel Bode (left) and his Radar Observer Lieutenant Avery J. Miller flew a colorful P-61 named *The Spook.* This photograph was probably taken on Saipan when the 548th Squadron was based there. Each of the five kills made by the squadron was made by a different pilot. There were two gunners, however, who were involved in two kills each. The last four night fighter squadrons that were formed had a difficult time finding any enemy aircraft up in the air at night. By the early spring of 1945, the Japanese were conserving their aircraft and preparing for the imminent Allied invasion of their home islands. There was still a limited amount of night action in the Philippines and Ie Shima, but the night patrols had to venture further out to have any chance of radar contacts. The last two squadrons formed only scored one kill in total. (Mel Bode)

Assigned to *Hop'N Ditty* on Iwo Jima, Lieutenant Bill Charlesworth (far right) is seen on the 549th Squadron's flight line in May 1945. The success of the night intruder missions against Japan by the 549th was undetermined because the squadron had no way of taking photos to determine the extent of the damage they inflicted. There were, on occasion, secondary explosions, but these were rare. At best, the Japanese were not allowed much sleep and on some missions, they turned on all their searchlights and fired numerous rounds at the sound of the engines in an effort to scare the P-61s away. Night landing on Iwo was hazardous at times, due to the presence of Mount Suribachi, which loomed up on the approach from the southeast. (Bill Charlesworth)



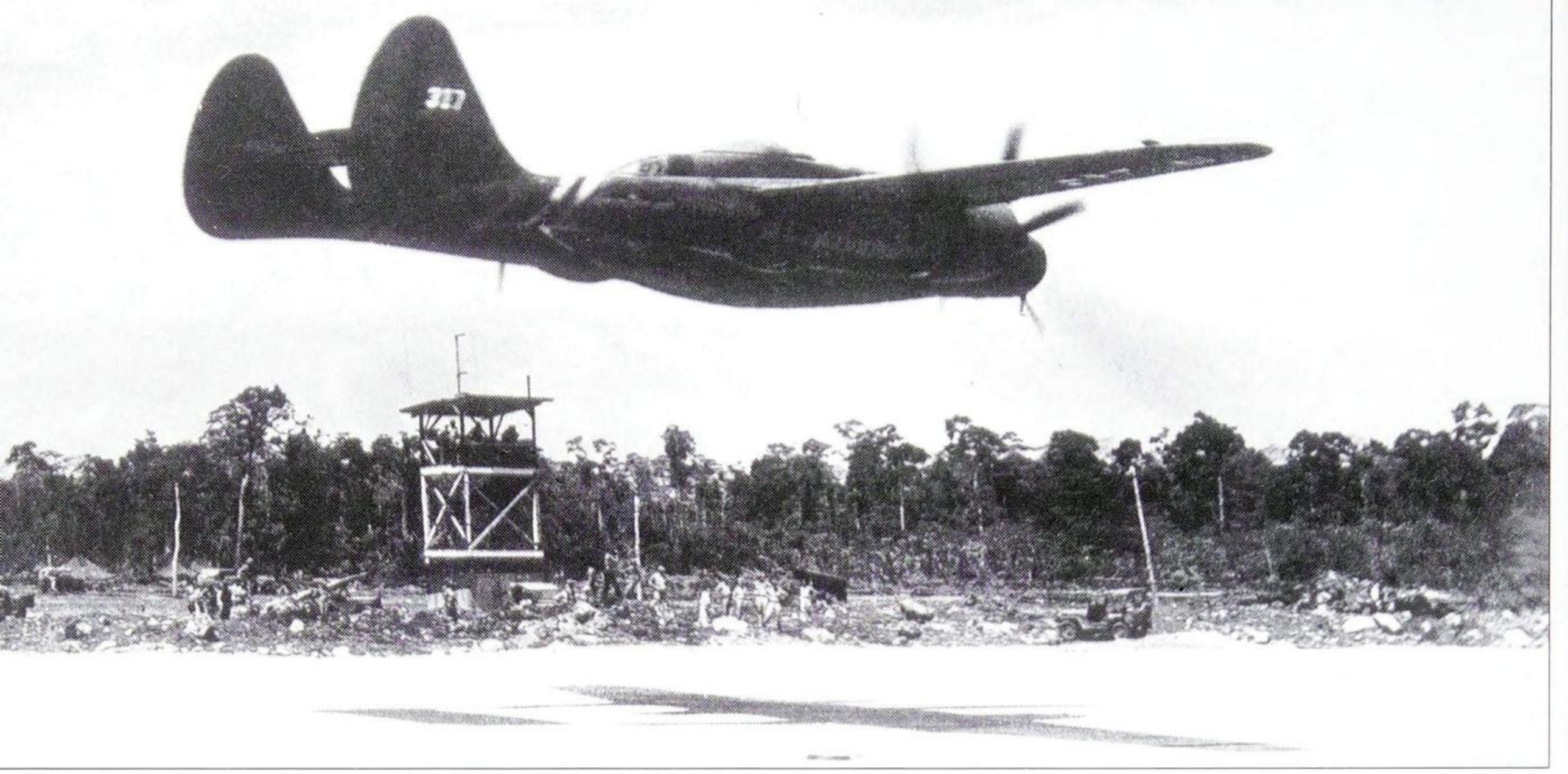
***Old Salty Dog II* was assigned to the 419th NFS on Biak Island in 1944. It was assigned to Lieutenant R. E. Winslow, but the kill was credited to another pilot who had flown it on a mission. (Ed Fulghum)**

however, so they went with what they had left. It didn't seem to concern them because the two bombers had gone down with two short bursts and by this time, it was getting close to first light and they figured that any Japanese aircraft that were still in the area would be heading back to their bases before sunrise. They were dead wrong.

"We had been back on patrol for a short while when GCI came on again with another vector of an unknown intruder coming into our airspace. Lt. Porter got a clear contact when we were three miles out and he told me to descend down to about 500 feet. This led to a chase almost down to sea level and then right back up to 500 feet. Most of the time, I had my flaps extended for slow speed maneuvering. There was no doubt that the pilot knew we were back there and to skim the water like that, in the dark, was very dangerous. I was following what Porter told me to do as I had not yet gotten a glimpse of the intruder and I was hoping that my R/O knew what he was doing! Finally, I got him in sight and it was a 'Rufe' (Nakajima A6M2-N fighter with floats). He was about 300 feet in front and I fired a short burst of 20mm which hit home and the aircraft exploded and at that low level went into the water immediately. The pilot probably never knew what hit him. This chase/kill had reinforced my confidence in Lt. Porter and I would never have any doubts about his expertise especially at such low altitudes. I could tell when we were getting close to a target even though I couldn't see anything because the pitch of his voice as it went up in direct relation to the range."

The night was not over for Smith and Porter because GCI called and said they had another one coming toward them at six miles range and 5,000 feet altitude. The sun was definitely getting ready to peek out on the horizon. This time Major Smith closed and got a positive identification from further out and it was a "Frank" (Nakajima Ki 84-I fighter that had a speed of over 380 mph with a range of 1,300 miles). This fighter was capable of giving a P-51 all it could handle. With enough light to see, Major Smith knew that if he didn't get the "Frank" quickly and it turned into a daylight dogfight, he would have no place to hide. He also didn't know how much ammunition he had left. After all, he had already bagged three kills and had not been able to re-load his ammo. Coming in low and behind to a dangerously close distance of about 75 feet, he knew it had to be a fast kill.

Very few Black Widow pilots had tried to make a kill at such a short distance and Major Smith was going to get a visual demonstration of just how destructive four 20mm cannon can be on an aircraft. He stated that when he fired, less than two seconds into the burst, the "Frank" completely disintegrated and he had to initiate some violent maneuvers to avoid the debris. The enemy pilot was probably killed



One of the first 419th Squadron Black Widows to arrive at Puerto Princesa in Palawan, the Philippines, buzzes the airfield before landing on 6 March 1945. (USAF)

instantly and never knew what had happened as he had no idea that he was being stalked. When they landed, their crew chief checked the 20mm ammo. They had expended only 382 rounds which left them about 200 rounds. They were in better shape to take on the "Frank" than they thought. With four text book kills in one night, Major Smith probably would have been in an elite fraternity with the day fighter pilots. It was certainly the most successful mission flown by an American night fighter in any theater of operation.

Of the 16 night fighter squadrons formed up by the Army Air Corps during World War II, the 548th was the fourteenth to get into the war. It was credited with five aerial kills, one of which was produced by a P-61 named *Midnite Madness* crewed by pilot Captain James Bradford and his R/O Lt. Larry Lunt. On the night of 24 June 1945, they took off from Ie Shima for a routine combat air patrol under the control of GCI (code named "Delegate"). Take off was at 1835 hours and they did not hear from the controller until 2110 hours, well into the patrol. The intruder was flying at 19,000 feet and by the time they were headed in his direction, the bogey had moved up to 20,000 feet.

Lt. Lunt's debriefing report tells the story, "When we first got the vector from 'Delegate,' we were at 9,000 feet and we were told to climb up to 20,000 feet as quickly as possible. It took up about eight minutes to get there after dropping our external tanks. We got a lock on him at eight miles and it was an easy chase because he gave no evasive action which meant he was unaware of our presence. Our gunner, M/Sgt. Sukow, had night binoculars and was able to help Captain Bradford get close enough for a positive identification and the intruder was definitely a Jap 'Betty' bomber. The fact that it was a clear night with a bright moon helped. We closed to 700 feet before opening up with our guns and our first burst seemed to have no effect, but the second one followed quickly and this time hosed down the Betty's port engine starting a fire. Bradford's third burst hit in the same place and it amplified the fire that was already spreading down the fuselage, lighting up the big rising sun emblem on the side. He started into a slight port turn and glided with us following at several thousand feet in trail. The pilot seemed to have total control of his aircraft, but after descending about 5,000 feet, the Betty exploded and immediately went into a straight dive, plunging on down into the sea where it burned for several minutes before sliding under the water. At that moment, I thought I had picked up another bogey on my scope, but it was just some "window" that had been put out by the stricken bomber we just shot down."

After *Midnite Madness* landed, the crew chief gave it a once over to make sure there was no damage. His report stated that they had fired 215 rounds of 20mm ammunition and 229 rounds of .50 caliber rounds from the top turret and its engines had consumed 662 gallons of fuel. It had been a productive mission with good results. In this late stage of the war, the Japanese were not committing very many of their valuable aircraft over heavily patrolled Allied airbases.

The last night fighter squadron to be formed up by the Air Corps was the 550th. It was activated on 1 June 1944 but did not receive its first P-61 until 6 January 1945. The squadron launched into combat operations while based in New Guinea and saw most of its combat while based on Leyte with detachments scattered out on Zamboanga, Sanga Sanga, and Puerto Princesa in the Philippines. The squadron flew a lot of intruder missions but Japanese aircraft were almost non-existent in their areas. They were commanded by Major Robert A. Tyler for their entire combat tour. The war had moved far from the squadron's base and most of the time it was quite boring with the exception of the softball games that kept the personnel in good spirits. Major Tyler describes one game that was abruptly ended by the whine of a Black Widow diving out of control straight toward the ground. It only proved that some of the "leisure" flying in the P-61 in between missions could prove to be costly!

"In addition to our ball games, I allowed for one of our aircraft to

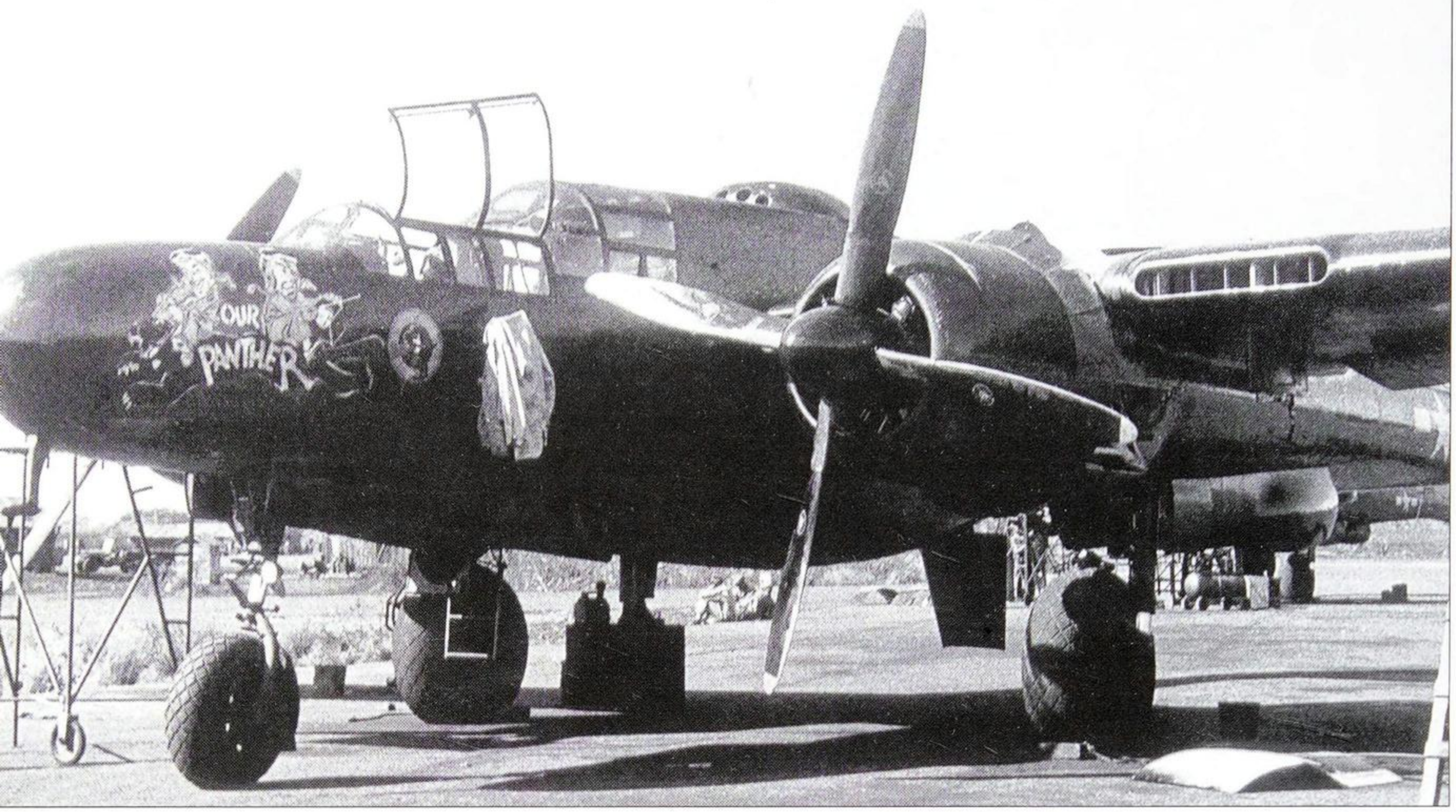
This Black Widow carries long-range external fuel tanks. Not long before the war ended, the 421st NFS moved to Clark Field in the Philippines where it flew long night-intruder missions against Japanese shipping and airfields. (John Chew)

be taken up for some daytime aerobatics. Up until this time, I had strictly forbidden this because the installed radar was temperamental and was easy to throw out of calibration and since our mission was basically night work, we had to have our SCR-720 working perfectly. One of our pilots took off with his crew chief in the back radar observer's compartment. He decided to climb up to 15,000 feet and do his repertoire of aerobatics. After while, he decided to Split-S, lose altitude rapidly and land. He half rolled the aircraft and then pulled back quickly on the control column. He had started the maneuver at too high a speed and he reached compressibility, a phenomenon not too well understood at that time. He frantically pulled back on the controls, but to no avail. He was plummeting straight down and the controls seemed like they were in cement!"

"I was playing ball and heard the scream of his engines and all eyes looked up to find out where it was coming from. The sound got louder by the second and the pitch was rising, I still didn't have the aircraft in sight but braced myself for the loud crash. Suddenly a black streak flashed by at about 200 feet shedding parts as it went. I was petrified because I could see it was one of our Black Widows! I jumped into my jeep and headed for the runway because I figured there was no way he could get it down safely. The pilot gradually had gotten the controls to respond once he got down to the denser air. As I reached the strip, I could see the P-61 landing toward me at the other end. Miraculously, he put the aircraft down and stopped it immediately in the middle of the runway. He jumped out and ran back to the rear compartment to see how his crew chief was. The poor guy was like a piece of granite and he could neither move nor talk! The entire Plexiglas cone had come off, so he had been riding practically out in the open. When it came off, it took the entire center section of the elevator with it. Only about 2.5 feet of effective elevator remained on either side for control. The rear half of the fuselage pod was wrinkled as well as the inboard flaps. The fastest P-61 in the Pacific was now ready for the scrap heap, but it proved that it was one of the toughest aircraft built during the war."

Lieutenant Mel Stevick was one of the 550th pilots that flew his entire combat tour with the squadron and some of its detachments. He recalls an unusual mission he flew against Japanese troop positions on Cebu Island. Philippine guerilla units had radioed HQ about the situation and plans were put in place to do something about it. He recalls the events as they unfolded. "We had two P-61s assigned to this mission and we were to land on a tiny guerilla-controlled strip on the west coast of the island. From the air, it looked like a big driveway leading up to a big house and we had to land on it. We came in low and slow with full flaps and plenty of power, making a slight flare about 50 feet from the edge of the strip. In the meantime, a Marine Corsair pilot had been listening on the radio and wanted to know if he could get in on any action we were anticipating. The guerilla leader quickly approved his joining up with us. We landed and had a great meal with all the trimmings and right afterwards, we were told to 'saddle-up' and things got serious quickly. We would be carrying a couple of Guerillas with us to make sure we hit the right place.

"Our two Black Widows and the bent-wing Corsair took off and stayed at tree top level for about 20 minutes. Suddenly, our lead P-61 climbed sharply up to 2,000 feet and started a shallow dive towards a palm grove containing some buildings. Tapping his rudders, the P-61 started spraying 20mm rounds all over the compound below. I opened up from 1,000 feet and followed the same pattern. At that same moment, the Marine Corsair roared in right above me with his .50 calibers spewing lead all over the place and I released my firing button in hopes that none of his rounds would hit me! We had caught the enemy completely off guard and their compound was reduced to rubble in a couple of minutes. We deposited our guests back at their base and returned to our field. The guerilla force was planning an immediate attack on that location to finish the job we started. When we reviewed the lead P-61's gun camera film,



Parked on le Shima in the spring of 1945, *Our Panther* was a P-61B assigned to Lieutenant Fred Kuykendall and his R/O Lieutenant Charles Rouse in the 548th NFS. (Joe Weathers)

it showed a Japanese officer running out the front door for a few steps and suddenly his entire upper torso disappeared in the wall of 20mm rounds. The entire mission, including the meal, had taken only seven hours from start to finish."

Between 7 February and 7 April 1945, the 550th was responsible for air protection over Morotai at night. This was only one of the detachment's many locations. Lt. Robert Graham was one of the pilots assigned to this job. Although the squadron had no kills in the P-61, they had a couple of close calls and one of them could have been tragic. Lt. Graham explains: "Three of our Black Widows were sent here to protect the assets until the Australians arrived in their Spitfires to take over. At this time, the Japanese seemed to know every move we made and they sure knew that our detachment had arrived. The first night they came in and bombed us real good; hitting an ammunition dump. Tokyo Rose came on the radio the next day saying 'How'd you boys at Morotai like that? You're going to get it again tonight!' and she was usually right.

"The Japanese usually came in between 10 p.m. and midnight, so the three of us pilots flipped a coin for that mission and I won. We told the Aussies we were taking back our air cover and as we got out in position, my R/O, Lt. Bud Bylsma, called out 'I've got an unidentified aircraft on the screen,' and I answered, 'let's go get him.' What my R/O meant was there was an aircraft out there with no IFF (identification friend or foe) working. We chased it down but couldn't get a visual because the night was so dark. We pulled in close and 10 degrees below and all I had to do was open fire and pull the nose up slightly. For some unknown reason, I called Australian ground control (I didn't have to) and told them I have an unidentified aircraft in my sights and am going to open fire. Their GCI immediately told me to hold my fire. It's a friendly chicken ('chicken' was a code word for fighter). Needless to say, I was furious! I told them to get him out of the air before someone shoots him down! It turned out to be a Spitfire. The Japs never showed up that night. They seemed to know the capabilities and reputation of the P-61 and they stayed out of the air when we were up. That Spitfire had an IFF but it wasn't working, so it was his lucky night!"

One of the most versatile night fighter squadrons to see action in the Pacific was the 418th. The unit was activated on 1 April 1943 and began its march across the Pacific on New Guinea, with numerous detachments scattered out to various forward bases and then on to the Philippines. Two weeks before the atomic bombs were dropped on Japan, the 418th moved on to Okinawa. The unit received its first P-61s only in early September 1944, but ended up with the highest kill score of any Pacific night fighter squadron with 18. Records show that they flew night missions under the 13th Air Force banner in several different aircraft, including the P-70, the searchlight-equipped P-38 Lightning, the B-25 Mitchell, and finally the P-61 Black Widow.

Lt. Stanley E. Logan, one of their experienced pilots, offers his insight into some of the squadron's missions once it got to Okinawa where their main task was interdiction and night intruder missions against targets in Japan. "The 418th flew into Okinawa on 26 July 1945 from the Philippines. And two days later, we got into the night intruder sorties against various Jap air bases, particularly on Kyushu. Each mission consisted of a single P-61, loaded with two external fuel tanks. We used the fuel in these to get to the Japanese coast and as we approached, we jettisoned the tanks. We carried two-1,000 GP bombs that were capable to cratering the runways and putting

The Spook, assigned to pilot Lieutenant Mel Bode and R/O Lieutenant Avery J. Miller of the 548th Night Fighter Squadron, was destroyed along with a few other aircraft that tried to land on Iwo Jima in a heavy fog while almost out of fuel. (Mel Bode)

the airfields out of business for a short while. These missions proved to be the first time that P-61s carried bombs against mainland Japan because in the past, we had only been looking for night flying enemy aircraft.

"Each night, a series of missions was spaced about two hours apart with the objective of keeping the enemy up and alert all night long. This posed another major problem for Jap night air operations in that the airfields had to keep their runway lights off which interfered with their launching aircraft against our forces on Okinawa. We also kept their personnel awake all night and our SCR-72 was constantly scanning to see if any of them had managed to get airborne. We had a few chases after attacking their airfield at Kumamato and on the previous night another of our crews caught a Betty bomber in the traffic pattern at the same airfield and shot it down. Even though the war was only a couple of weeks from ending, our raids significantly reduced the enemy attacks on Okinawa and Allied shipping."

Lt. Logan recalls a mission at that time with his R/O George Kamajian on the blackest night imaginable. They were continuing their attacks on airfields while flying in their assigned P-61 named *Black Panther* early in the morning (1 A.M.) of 5 August. "The entire Kyushu region was blacked out from the time we got within about 20 miles of the coast, so we used a radar bombing technique that I had worked out with my Radar Observer. I had demonstrated it earlier while we were still in the Philippines," Lt. Logan recounted. "We approached over Kagoshima Bay lined up with a radar-recognizable coastline feature on a bomb run directly to the target. This was the only way to go, because all the lights were out down on the ground and it was a very dark night. Lt. Kamajian called out the time the coast feature hit the range we had tabulated for our altitude and airspeed. I then counted off the seconds required to traverse the distance from there inland on the previously measured couple of miles to the airfield and released the two bombs. At that time, we were at 5,000 feet altitude. The bomb trajectory would follow directly below us until impact, but the fusing delay (probably set for three seconds) detonated after we had moved on perhaps a thousand feet or so. Prior to bomb release, about a dozen search lights came on all around us, apparently ringing the entire airfield.

"They were thrashing all around searching for us and this pretty well confirmed that we did, in fact, fly right over the target as planned! Twice, a beam swept through our cockpit, lighting it like daylight, but moving on without seeing us, thanks to our glossy black paint job. If one of them had locked on us, the others would have coned on us and we would not be here today. High-altitude photo reconnaissance had revealed heavy defense by at least 240 gun emplacements of .50 caliber, 20mm, 40mm and even 90mm placed around the base. One of the search lights was especially disturbing. It moved off us to one side. After bomb release when I did some evasive course movements, it tracked but not directly on us. I assumed it was a sound tracking-directed unit that, fortunately for us, had a static error. Believe me; I didn't try to contact them by radio to report the error! I did a quick 180 and headed back to the comparative safety of Kagoshima Bay open water and the search lights all went dark. It was a black-black, no moon, no horizon, and no stars visible type of night. The worst kind!

"It was so dark that while working on fuel estimates and other tasks, I had drifted into a gradual turn that wasn't noticed until the search lights came on again all around us, indicating I had done another 180 and was right back over our original target area! Now, it was definitely time to head back to base. To avoid going over the same general path line a fourth time (twice was too much), I turned about 90 degrees to the south and headed over land to the ocean. The complete darkness indicated there must have been a high cloud cover, but there were no clouds visibly blocking searchlights. We never picked up any aircraft on our radar and we saw nothing on the ground except blackness and the search light beams when they were on. We also did not notice light from bomb detonation, which would have been behind us, but this may have been because of the surrounding bright search light beams."

When Iwo Jima was captured in February-early March 1945, the 6th Night Fighter Squadron sent several of its more experienced pilots and aircraft over to help the 548th get situated and to help repel the Japanese effort to re-enforce or re-supply their troops and attack American troops at night. Captain Ernie Thomas was one of the 6th pilots sent in. On the night of 25 March 1945, he and his air crew; Lt. John Acre (R/O) and Corporal Jesse Tew (Gunner) launched at 1825 hours to conduct an East-West patrol south of the island at 10,000 feet altitude. Their call sign was "Maple Red-1." A short while into the patrol, GCI alerted them to a bogey. AI contact was made almost immediately and Captain Thomas closed in too fast and overshot before he obtained a visual. He circled quickly and was able to make contact again with help from their controller.

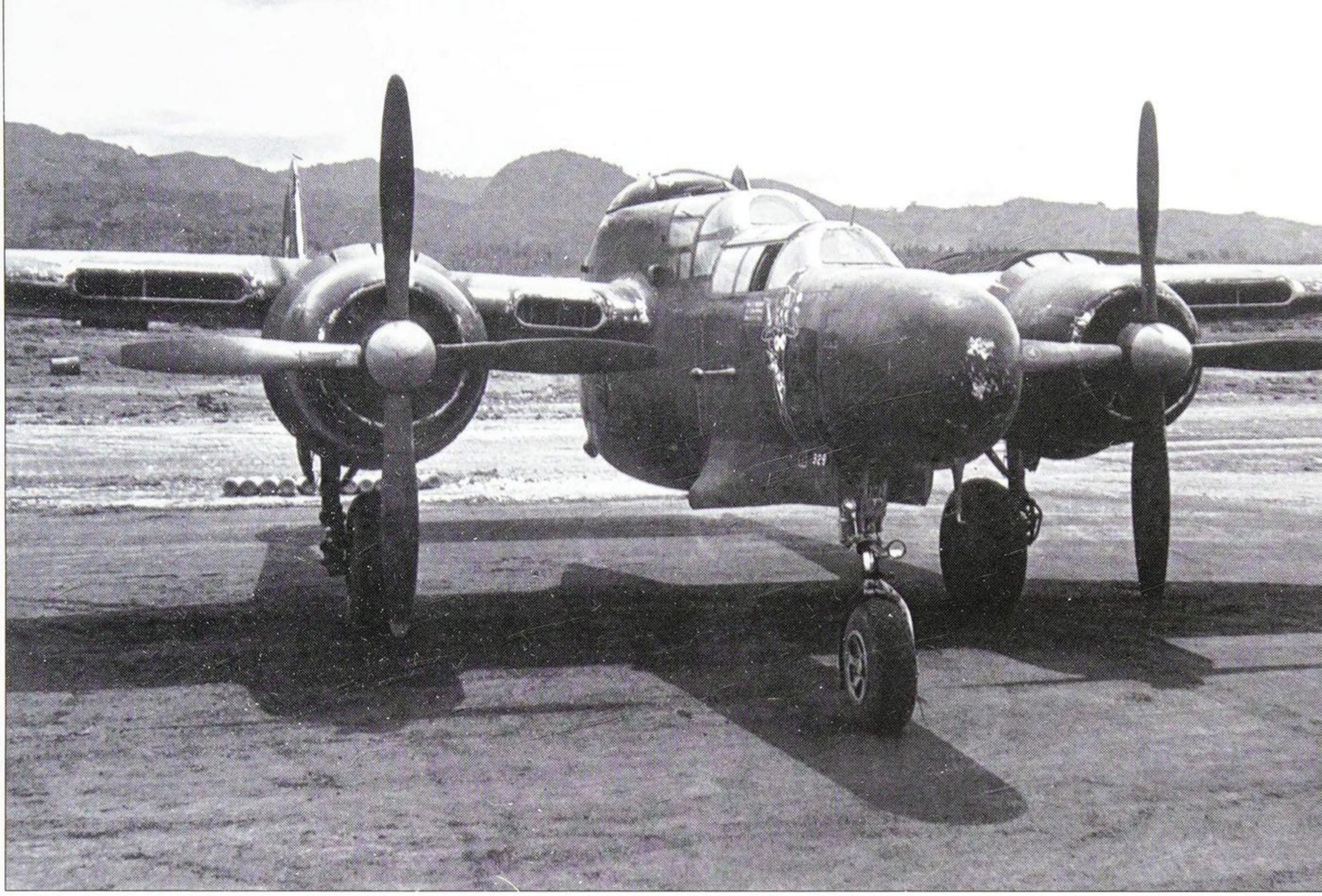
This time he slowed way down and before he could get close enough to identify it, he stalled out as his speed dropped to about 100 mph. Due to the slow speed of the attacker, it was almost impossible to line him up for a shot. This one just disappeared off the scope, so they continued their patrol and GCI gave them another vector and Captain Thomas came up from behind quickly as they had picked it up at seven miles distance. He tried to get in close and over shot three times. On the fourth try, the intruder started letting down, thus building up some airspeed. This allowed the P-61 to close to 1,000 feet at airspeed of 170 mph and this allowed Corporal Tew to positively identify it as a Japanese "Betty." "Red-1" closed to 600 feet

This P-61 assigned to the 421st NFS scored three kills while being flown by more than one pilot and R/O. It was the personal mount of Captain William T. Bradley, commanding officer of the squadron between May 1944 and January 1945. The fancy artwork represented a female black widow spider. (James Green)

before making a deflection shot using all eight guns. The left engine of the Betty exploded immediately. On fire, the stricken bomber continued to lose altitude as it went into a cloud layer at 4,000 feet. At that moment, there was another explosion on the aircraft which lit up within the cloud. The layer was thin and the R/O stated that he saw it break into three sections before it disappeared completely. Witnesses on a ship below confirmed that it hit the water. When the intercept began, the altitude was 15.000, feet and the kill occurred 95 miles southeast of Iwo Jima at 2150 hours. The crew chief told the crew that they had only expended 32 rounds of 20mm and 38 rounds of .50 calibers. This had only been one kill of the 16 kills made by the 6th Squadron in the Black Widow.

As the war wound down, several P-61 squadrons were in a good position to carry out night intruder attacks against enemy assets on Kyushu but were not in a place where nightly intercepts and the chances for kills were plentiful. The 548th Squadron, based out of Ie Shima, was one of these. On some nights they unleashed a wave of Black Widows, loaded with bombs, against a wide variety of targets. On the night of 16 June 1945, they sent out five of their aircraft in search of anything that needed destroying on Kyushu and Amami Gunto. Their favorite load was 500-pound or 1,000-pound GP's that could wreak havoc with airfield runways. The Black Widows were launched at different times with each aircraft covering a specific area in order to eliminate the chances of a mid-air collision. The first to take off was Captain Bill Dames in his *Bat Outa Hell.* It was loaded with two 1,000-pound bombs and a full load of ammo. The following details are quoted verbatim from his debriefing after the mission.

"We got airborne at 1932 hours (right before sunset) and a short time later, we were given three different vectors in order to confirm the exact position of our aircraft. We flew slightly above 2,500 feet until we reached a point 10 miles south of Amami when we got cleared to start a free-lance sweep of the island. We went down low to see if there was anything worth bombing, but that was negative. Then we circled the entire island in hopes of spotting some motor launches or small boats that were moving or at anchor.



Parked at Zamboanga, on Mindanao Island, in the southern Philippines, this Black Widow belongs to a detachment of the 419th NFS based there from 15 March to 20 July 1945. When the war ended, the 419th NFS was based at Puerto Princesa, on Palawan in the western Philippines. (Don Clancy)

That also was negative, so we climbed up to 7,000 feet and orbited. A thin overcast was forming up around our area, so it was hard to pinpoint anything on the ground. Through a small hole in the cloud layer, my gunner spotted a several small fires in an oval pattern slightly inland from the shoreline. In the center of these small fires was a much larger one which indicated that it was a bivouac area for enemy troops. I lined up that spot and went into a steep dive from 7,000 feet and released both bombs. Due to the developing weather conditions, we couldn't see what damage we had done and there were no secondary explosions. We returned to base at 2219 hours. There were no unidentified aircraft in the air that night in our patrol area."

The other four P-61s had about the same results with no AI contacts and nothing coming in from their ground controller. They searched for targets of opportunity and came up empty. Two of the Black Widows reported that they ran into heavy rain squalls and even after dropping down to 2,000 feet, they could not see well enough to pick out any targets even if there had been some. They hugged the coastline looking for any ships. One of the pilots stated that they headed straight for a known seaplane base and found it empty of any aircraft. The five Black Widows burned a total of 2,235 gallons of fuel on their intruder mission that night with no 20mm ammo expended. At this time in the war, missions of this type were commonplace as most of the Japanese were hunkered down on the mainland preparing for the upcoming invasion.

As the war wound down in late July 1945, the 548th Squadron was in a good position on Ie Shima to range out close to the Japanese mainland on intruder missions and if there were any hostile aircraft flying at night, they would be in a perfect position to intercept them. On the night of 28-29 July, First Lieutenant Robert Bertram and his R/O 2nd Lt. George Fairweather, call sign "Bobolink-67," took off at 0041 hours for a combat air patrol (CAP). They were to take up station several miles from Ie Shima at an altitude of 12,000 feet. The patrol started off rather dull but 90 minutes after takeoff, GCI got a fast moving unidentified aircraft coming toward them at 12 miles out. Lt. Bertram closed fast and at eight miles, his R/O picked it up at 0212 hours. At a range of about three miles, GCI called the chase off because the bogey was coming within firing range of several ships and the P-61 would have to dodge the anti-aircraft fire and it wasn't worth the risk. When they broke off, they were told to climb to 16,000 feet and orbit. Before they completed one lap, they were told of another intruder at about the same altitude. Since the closure rate was so fast, they swung around in behind the bogey and got within 1,500 feet. With the moon out, the gunner-observer was able to identify the bogey positively as a Betty bomber. If it was easy to see the intruder at that distance, then it was easy for the gunners on the bomber to see the Black Widow. Immediately, the Betty pilot started violent evasive action.

The sharp-eyed gunner, Corporal Jesse Tew, was able to maintain a visual and directed Lt. Bertram to stay in close touch with the target. After several sharp turns, the P-61 stayed close and this triggered machine gun fire from the Betty's tail gunner's position. They continued to close and when there was less than a 1,000-foot separation, the Betty's top turret began firing as well. The tail

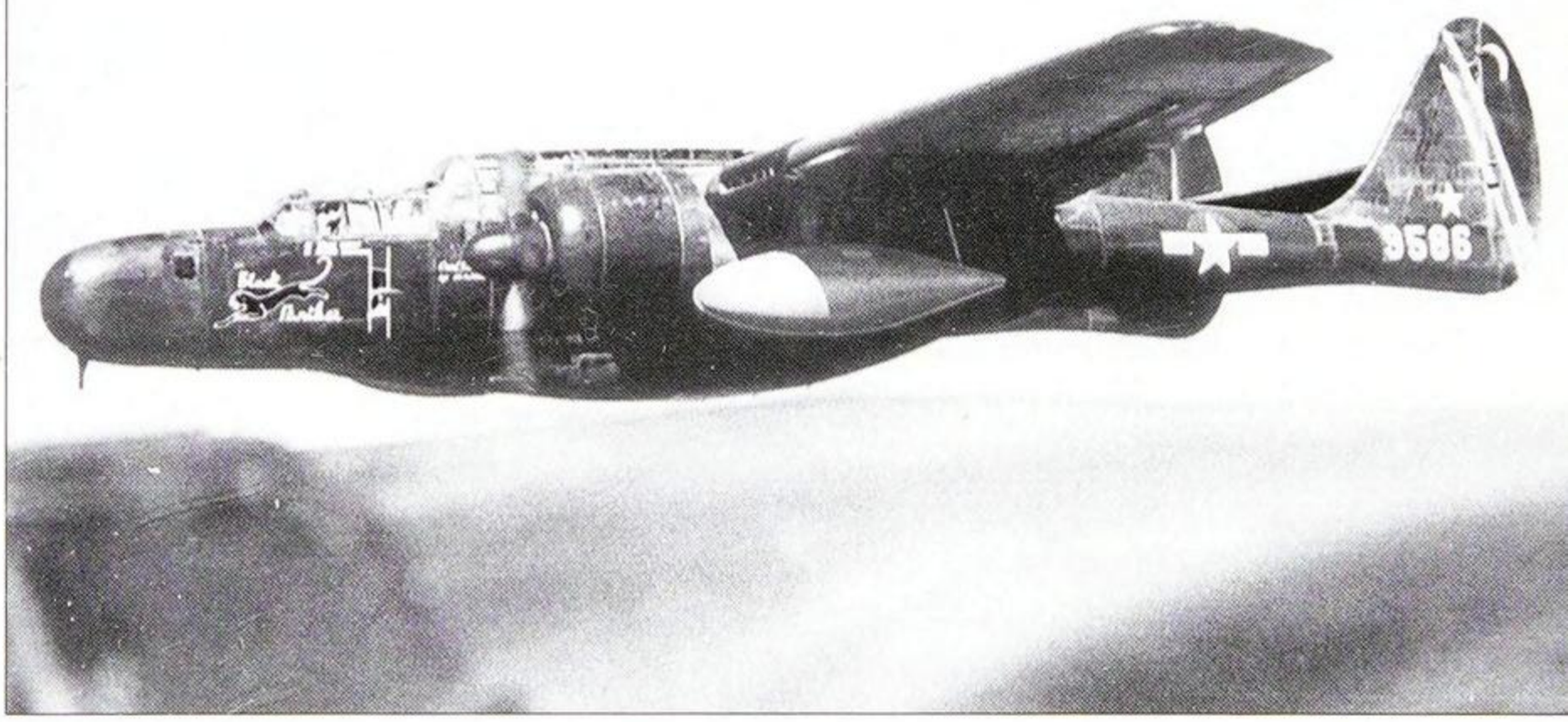
These 6th Night Fighter Squadron air crews have just received Air Medals at a presentation at their base on Saipan. *Jap Batty* had already made two kills when this was taken. On the far left is F/O Ray Mooney and third from left is Lieutenant Dale Haberman. They were the crew assigned to fly the famous Black Widow named *Moonhappy.* The 6th had more combat experience than any of the other night fighter squadrons. When the 548th and 549th Squadrons landed on Iwo Jima in March 1945, the 6th Squadron sent in some of their air crews to help train the new squadrons on the art of the night intercept. At that time, there was still plenty of action on the ground and the long-range P-61 group, based in Iwo, lost several pilots in a vicious night suicide attack by the Japanese. (USAF)

This glimpse of the 550th NFS Operations Shack "Ready Room" at Tacloban, the Philippines, on 19 May 1945 is a reminder that facilities in the Pacific Theater were crude at best. Even the gentle breezes that provided some relief from the tropical heat died down during the sultry afternoons. All of the 550th close air support and interdiction missions were planned and briefed in their Operations Room. At the time, the squadron was committed to flying extremely long missions that required large belly tanks to give them the range. Squadron commander Major Robert Tyler recalled that when they had to cover the invasion of Balikpapan, Borneo, the missions lasted approximately seven hours and their maximum fuel load only covered 7.5 hours, so they had no wiggle room if they hit bad weather. When they arrived back over their base, the cloud layer was sometimes at tree top level and they had a 50 m.p.h. crosswind. (Newell Witte)

The Intelligence Unit of the 550th Squadron, seen here in the Intelligence Shack at their base at Tacloban, Leyte Province in the Philippines, on 12 April 1945, determines what lies ahead for their P-61s and what type of resistance they are likely to encounter on their intruder missions. With the war moving inexorably closer to Japan's home islands, every fighter squadron in the theater was experiencing numerous changes in air fields. In some cases, the squadron was ordered to move to another base with very little time to get organized. This frequent shifting of position was especially characteristic of the Philippine Campaign with its multiple island fronts. (Newell Witte)

The air crew and ground crew of *The Gay Blade* relax on Sanga Sanga, the Philippines, in the early summer of 1945. They were part of a 550th Squadron detachment that was based here between 1 June 1945 and the end of the war in August 1945. The squadron's first assignment was to assist in re-taking the southern Philippines from a forward base at Tacloban on Leyte. They flew missions that consisted of patrol, convoy cover, invasion cover, and strafing ground and sea targets. These southern islands included Cebu, Panay, Negros, and Mindanao. There was minimal resistance from any night flying Japanese aircraft but the intense fighting on the ground produced numerous requests from ground troops for support at night. The squadron's Black Widows became very good at this mission. (George Freed)

First Lieutenant Stanley Logan's P-61 *Black Panther,* with the 418th NFS symbol emblazoned on its vertical stabilizer, wings its way back to Okinawa from an early-morning long-range mission to Japan. Logan was instrumental in perfecting night bombing by radar while flying against ground targets in Japan. All of the P-61 night intercepts had to be confirmed by visual identification before any aircraft could be fired on. Although the pilots were well briefed on exhaust patterns, they still had to get close enough to their target to be sure. On nights where they had a full moon, they could position themselves behind and below an intruder which silhouetted it against the moon and this gave them a positive i.d. Intercepting an incoming bogey in a head-on position was almost impossible because the rapid closure rate left no time to get a positive. When this situation presented itself, the P-61 would usually make a quick turn in behind the target and move up close enough for a clean kill. (Stan Logan)



Lady in the Dark, the Black Widow flown by Captain Lee Kendall, is probably one of the most notable Black Widows to serve in the Pacific Theatre and not just because of the aircraft's elaborate nose art. When the men and machines of the 548th Squadron were based on Iwo Jima in the early spring of 1945, they were not only tasked with protecting the numerous airfields during the hours of darkness, they also had to range out to hit targets of opportunity close to Japan. On many occasions, they returned to Iwo Jima at first light only to discover that a heavy fog had enveloped the island. Two of the squadron's aircraft were lost while attempting to land in zero-zero conditions. (Robert Tyldesley)

The crew chief on *Midnight Mickey* test fires the .50 caliber guns on his Black Widow before the air crew arrives for another late-night patrol at the 6th NFS base on Saipan. (USAF)

gunner missed by a wide margin, but the rounds fired by the top turret seemed to go right through the P-61's left prop. Bertram zeroed in on the top turret and fired a quick burst, silencing that gun. Another long burst of 20mm found its mark on the Betty's fuselage and right engine, causing sparks to fly from the bomber. The left engine started trailing smoke and the right engine burst into flames at least five times and each time the fire went out. Lt. Bertram stated "the Betty got out of control several times and nearly rolled over, but the pilot was able to right it each time."

This running gun battle continued all the way from about 19,000 feet to just above the overcast (1,500 to 2,000 feet). At that low point, the stricken bomber nosed straight down through the cloud layer. Bobolink-67 followed it down all the way to the deck but never saw it crash, as it disappeared off Lt. Fairweather's scope. As the Betty went into the clouds, it was trailing a shower of sparks and right before it went off the scope, it appeared to be engulfed in flames. The kill was confirmed by witnesses on a ship below. When the Black Widow returned to base, it had expended 1,230 rounds of .50 caliber and 540 rounds of 20mm, proof of their running gun battle with the Betty. On the patrol, they had burned 564 gallons of fuel. It was a tough kill but well worth the effort.

Three P-61 squadrons in the Pacific Theater had confirmed kills in the double digits. Of these, the 418th was the leader with 18 victories, followed closely by the 6th Squadron with 16 kills. One of the combat-tested Radar Observers with the 418th was Lieutenant Hugh Gordon who joined the squadron when it moved into Dutch New Guinea from Hollandia. His pilot was Captain Jim McQueen and their Black Widow had an unusual name *Moonbeam McSwine.* The squadron was based on a small island known as Biak, off the northern coast of New Guinea. Gordon vividly remembers those action-packed days. "It didn't take long for us to pack up again and move up to Morotai which was very close to the Equator. We slept in tents and were subject to air raids by Japanese bombers every night. They would always attack at low level from behind the Halmahera Islands, which was a string of islands that protected the bombers from our land-based radar. The Japanese had to pass over a relatively short span of water and would be right on top of us, dropping bombs before we could respond.

"We flew a lot of missions from Morotai between late September and the end of December 1944. From there we moved to Leyte to support General MacArthur's return to the Philippines. In the meantime, the General bypassed a lot of small islands that held thousands of Japanese troops. We simply cut them off and stopped the flow of supplies to them. We were told that whatever happened when we were flying, not to go down on one of those islands. We had our hands full stopping the night attacks that were pouring

Lieutenant Dale Haberman (pilot), Lieutenant Ray Mooney (R/O in the foreground) and Private Patrick Farrelly (gunner) prepare to climb in to the crew nacelle of *Moonhappy* for another mission from their 6th Squadron base in the Mariana Islands. (USAF)

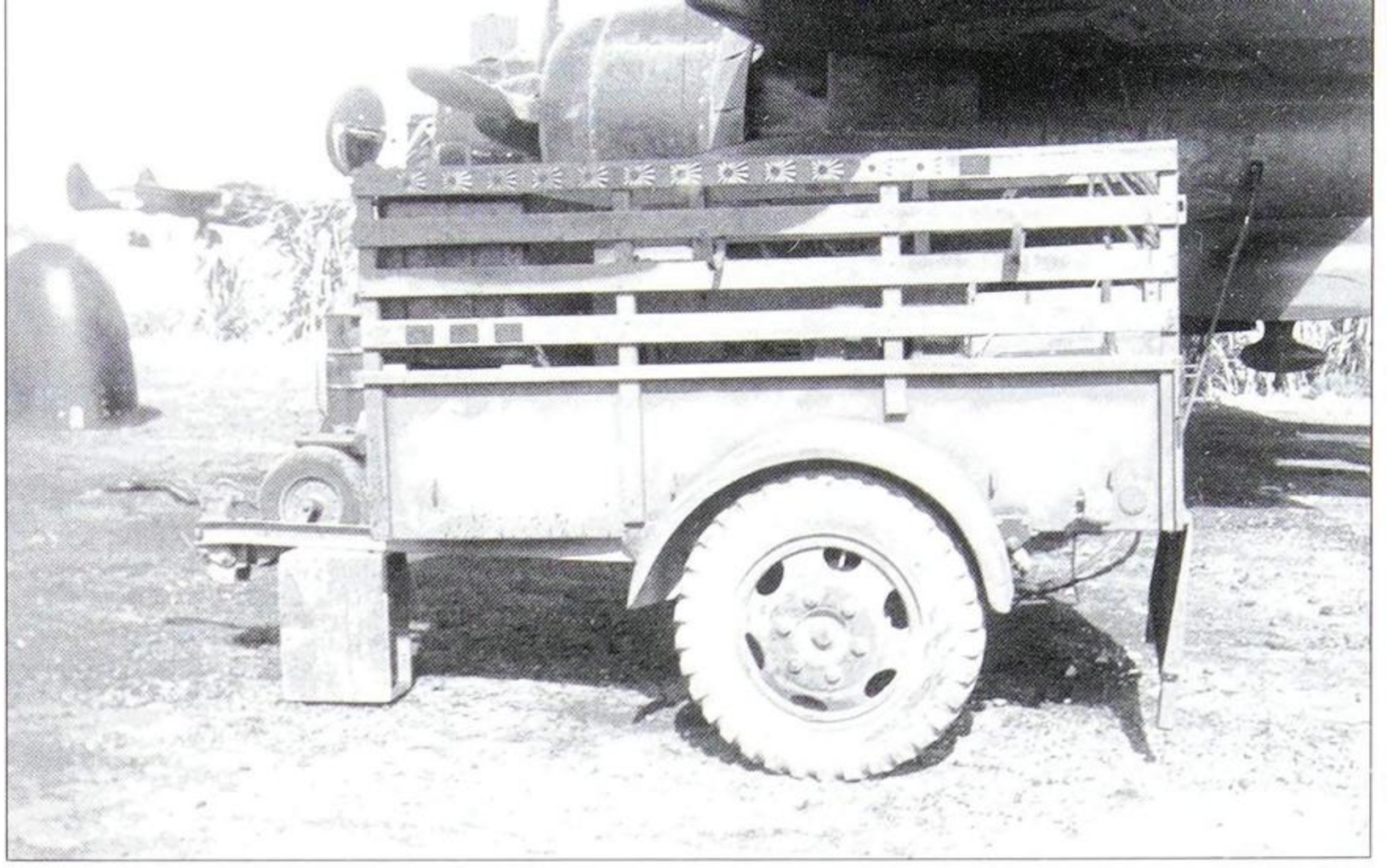
down from Manila in an effort to hit our ships and airfields. We also had a lot of pressure on us as our job was to fly cover for MacArthur's massive invasion fleet (several hundred ships) that were proceeding toward Luzon. The objective was to invade the main island of Luzon and then come down and capture Manila and free General Wainwright on Corregidor. We had to deal with night-flying enemy bombers and the day gunners had to try and stop some *kamikaze* attacks against the ships."

Lt. Gordon and his pilot Captain James McQueen were in the thick of it every night, but on one of the nights, they got lucky and bagged two Japanese Bettys that were bearing down on the fleet. They had been told to back off because they were already in range of the numerous anti-aircraft guns on the picket ships and they could easily have been shot down. Captain McQueen was too close to making the kills to back off and his pursuit continued. "I had picked up the bogey at 8,000 feet and 20 degrees above us. To my surprise, it looked like there were two elements of two planes, each flying in formation. Seconds later, we got a partial; visual on all four of them and they were what we had suspected; Betty bombers. We called fighter control just to make sure there were no friendly bombers in the area. At 2,000 feet, we closed and got into firing position and at that time, fighter control told us to break off as the bombers and our aircraft were entering the anti-aircraft fire zone which would be intense to say the least! Jim didn't hesitate as he closed and opened fire on one of them, firing two long bursts of 20mm. The first Betty was hit and dove straight down into the water below us. Seconds later, Jim made a deflection shot that exploded the second Betty. By this time, the other two turned around and headed back toward their base in Manila. But there was one problem: we were out of ammo or at least we thought we were."

In fact, McQueen and Gordon's P-61 was not out of ammo. There was a problem with the gun switches and if they hadn't malfunctioned, the air crew of *Moonbeam McSwine* would have accomplished a rare feat for a night fighter; four kills in one night. The Black Widow could have easily overtaken the retreating, fully-loaded Bettys unless they jettisoned their bombs and were able to make it up to high altitude. Both crew members were awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC) for the mission. Ground Control radar units, "Burlesque Base" and "Famous Base" operating from two Destroyers below confirmed both victories for the 418th crew.

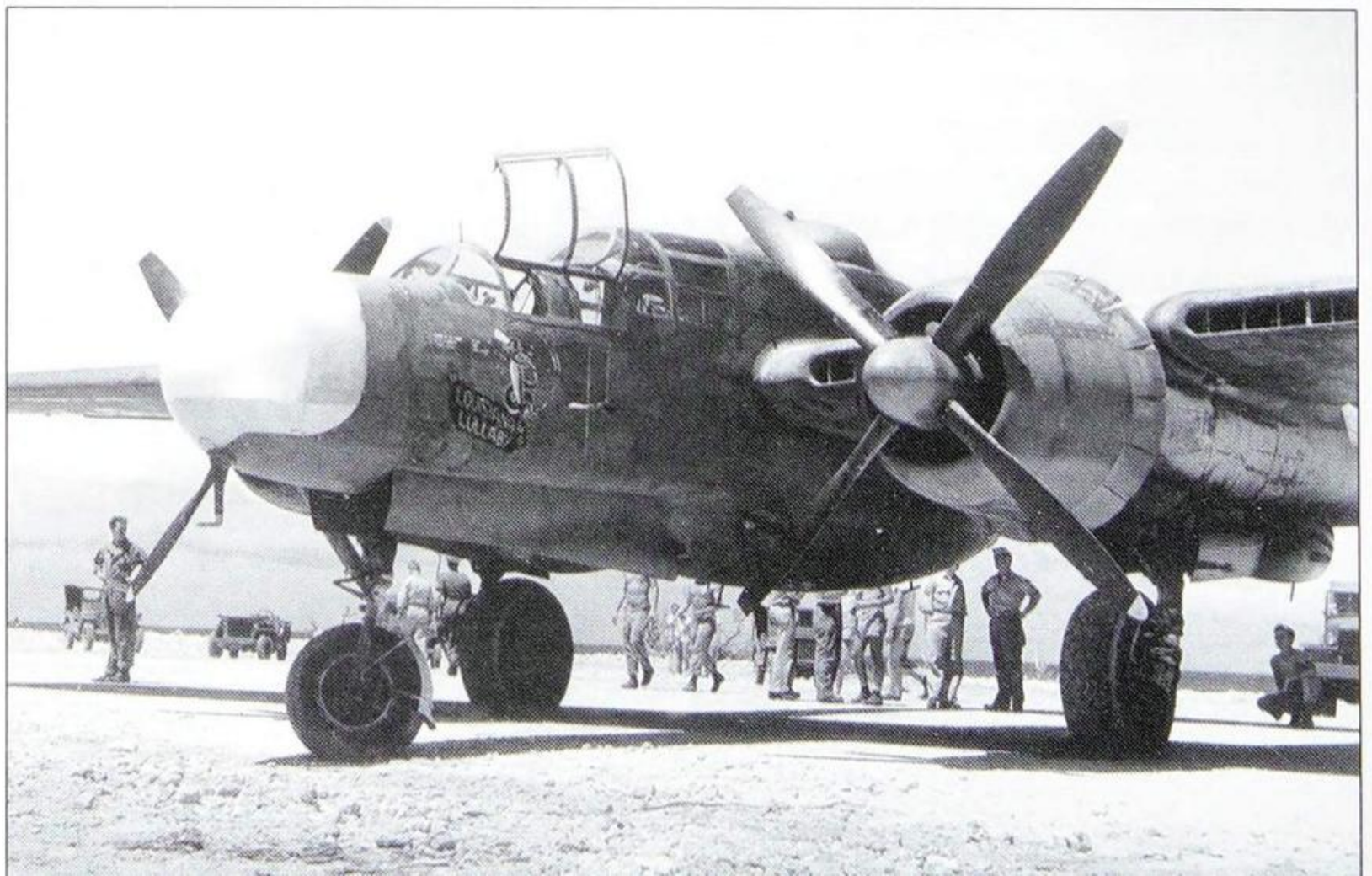
On another occasion, Lt. Gordon and his crew were lucky to get out of an uncanny incident in one piece. It was dusk, Lt. Gordon recalled, and there was still sufficient light. He said that at that time of day all of the day fighters were scrambling to get back to their carriers or to a nearby land base, so there were an unusually large number of aircraft in the air. The 418th also had several Black Widows already launched to begin early evening patrols. He and Captain McQueen were up at altitude and began dropping through

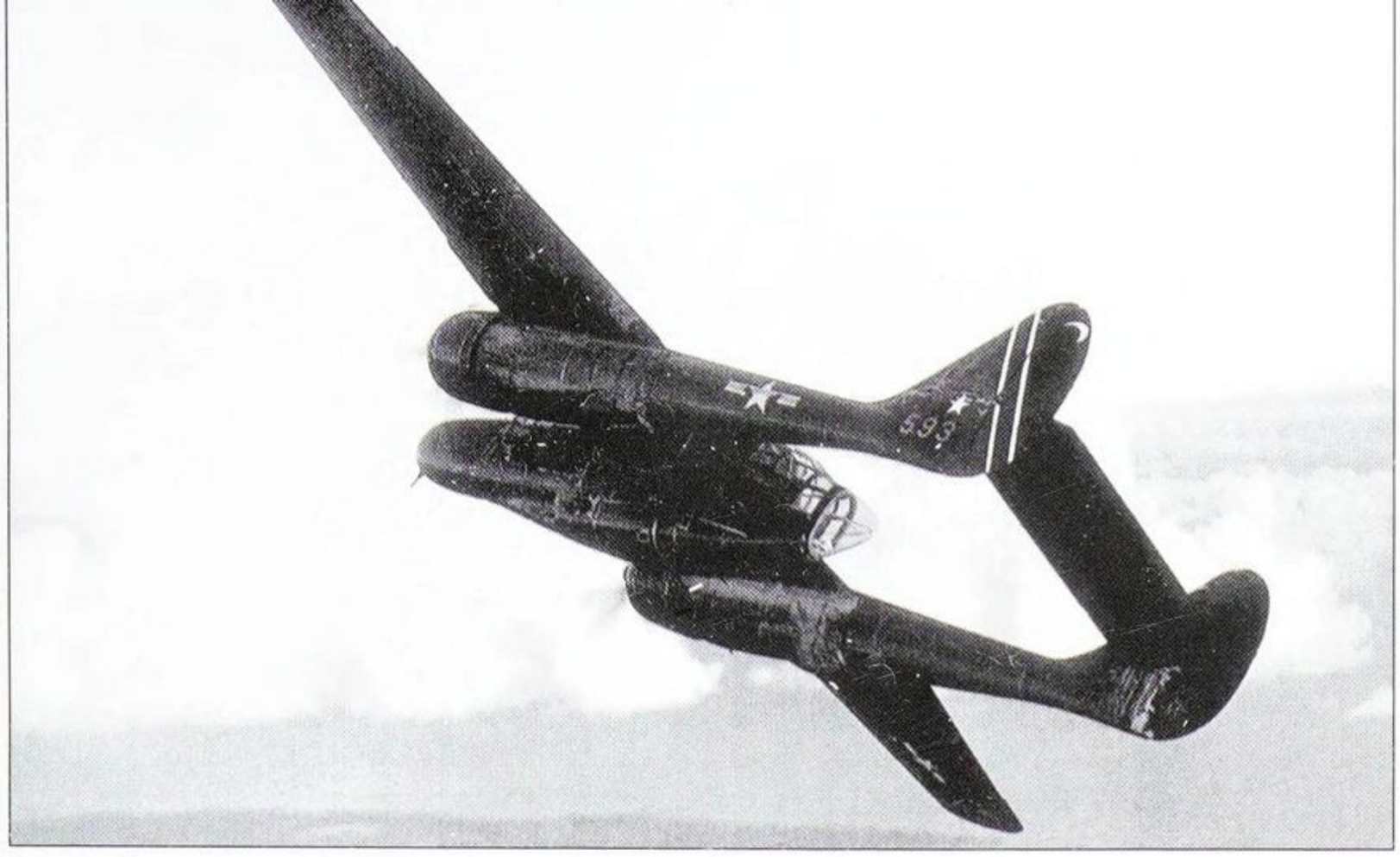
A Black Widow of the 6th Night Fighter Squadron is having some major work done on its SCR-720 radar. The equipment trailer shows all of the kill symbols for the squadron up to that date. The 6th Night Fighter Squadron was the second-highest-scoring American P-61 unit in the Pacific. At the time this photograph was taken, the 6th NFS had made 12 kills and would go on to rack up four more before the war ended. The squadron's aircraft attracted quite a lot of attention from the troops when they landed on Saipan for the first time. Most of the Army Air Corps personnel stationed in that area had never heard of a Black Widow before its arrival. (Vance Austin)



General Earl W. Barnes has just arrived on Middleburg Island northwest of the Island of New Guinea. When making his rounds of the forward bases, General Barnes, the commanding officer of the 13th Fighter Command, used an all-silver P-61 with a long-range fuel tank installed where the top turret was supposed to be. For some reason, General Barnes selected a new P-61 without the standard gloss black paint scheme. He was intent on visiting virtually all of the forward air bases within his command and with the added internal fuel tank in the aircraft, he had the range with a built-in safety factor. Also built into the aircraft was the SCR-720 radar system that gave him the ability to fly even in bad weather or during the safer nighttime hours. The wide array of military fighter aircraft that fought in the Pacific Theater were under the control of three major U.S. air forces; the 5th, 7th, and 13th. Middleburg Island housed a major airstrip located just north of Sansapor. Middleburg Airfield, built by U.S. forces after the liberation of the island from the Japanese, became operational on 15 August 1944 and was mostly used by P-38 Lightning units. (USAF)

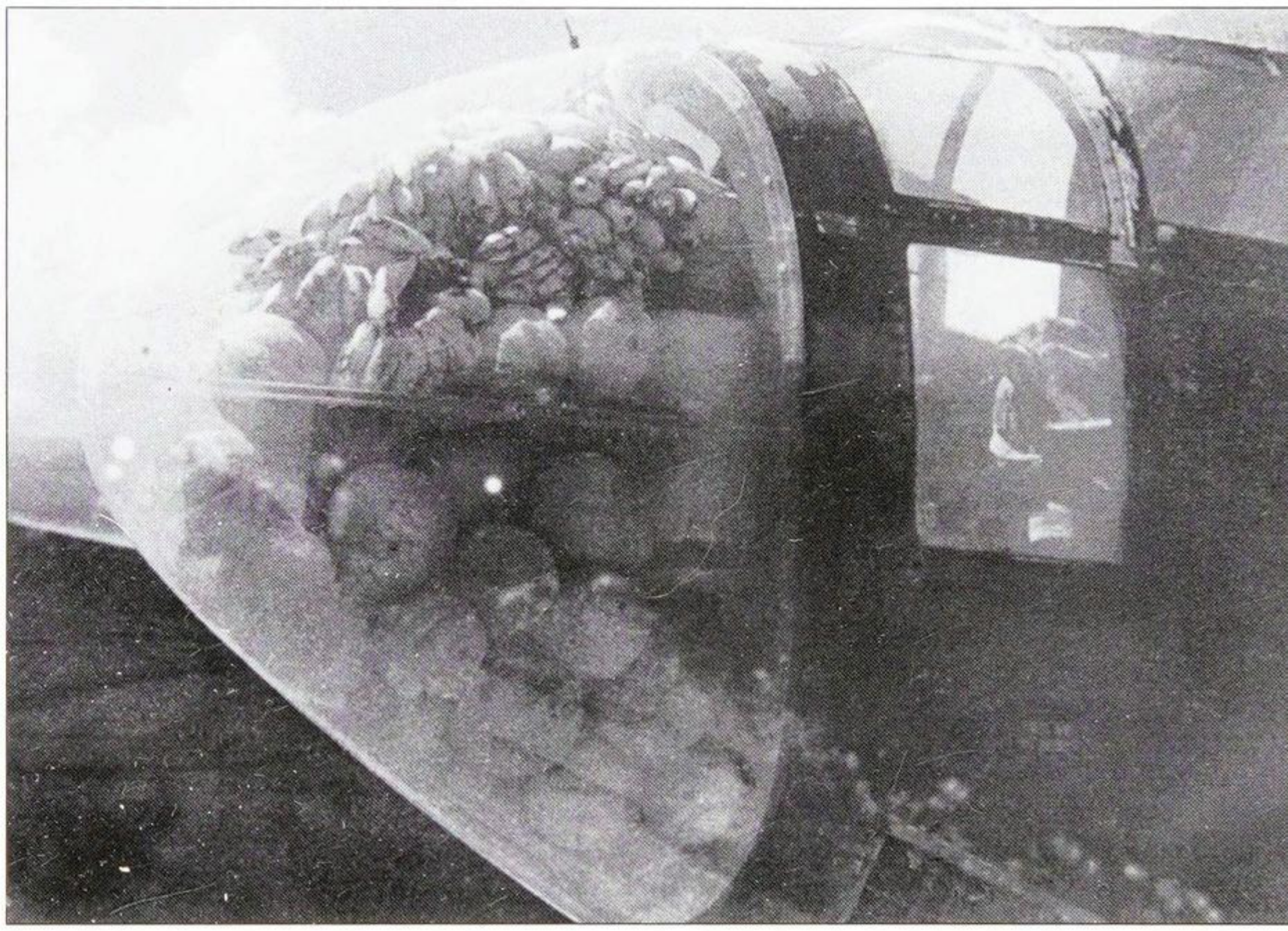
Louisiana Lullaby, seen here on Saipan in late June 1944, was assigned to the 6th Night Fighter Squadron's commanding officer, Major Vic Mahr. The 6th received its first Black Widow on 1 May 1944. The aircraft were picked up at the depot in Hawaii and first appeared in the forward areas on 12 June 1944 when they arrived on Saipan in the Northern Marianas. Those initial aircraft were the first batch of P-61As that had come off the assembly line and all were painted in dull olive drab. The unit boasted a couple of very good artists and accordingly, the first group of Black Widows featured some elaborate nose art. (USAF)





One of the 418th NFS Black Widows makes a quick maintenance check flight in preparation for that night's mission. The squadron's signature paint scheme on the vertical stabilizer is particularly evident at this angle. The 418th NFS was one of the most active night fighter squadrons in the Air Corps. It seemed to be right in the middle of the action, no matter which airfield it moved to. The unit scored numerous kills over the Philippines after it started flying the new Black Widows. With 18 aerial kills under its belt by the end of the war, the 418th compiled the highest kill record of any night fighter squadron in the Pacific Theater. (Hugh Gordon)

The 550th Night Fighter Squadron was the last of these specialized units to be formed. Unfortunately, it had very little, if any, chance of encountering enemy aircraft because the war had moved on closer to Japan. The squadron did some time on Middleburg Island, northwest of the Island of New Guinea, and on Morotai in the Molucca Islands, but there was very little enemy activity in the spring of 1945. The 550th did not receive its P-61s until 6 January 1945. At that time there were already an ample number of night fighter squadrons in the Pacific to handle the demands and protect the shipping lanes. Nevertheless, the squadron acquired considerable expertise in flying night intruder missions against ground targets. And then, there were other sorts of mission as well. This 550th Black Widow is hauling fresh fruit for members of the unit. When the war ended, the 550th was based on Sanga Sanga in the Philippines. (Newell Witte)



The 548th Squadron P-61 nicknamed *Lady in the Dark* made the final kill of World War II and then got another Japanese fighter the night after the war ended. Both kills were accomplished without firing a shot. The assigned air crew consisted of pilot Captain Lee Kendall (left) and his R/O Lieutenant John Scheerer. Captain Kendall flew most of his missions from Iwo Jima and Saipan. The flights were either long-range patrol or night-intruder missions on which the 20mm cannon were utilized to perfection. This Black Widow was probably the most photographed of all the aircraft in the 548th. Each of the unit's aircraft rivaled those of the 6th Squadron for their elaborate nose art. Beside the nose art, which was unique to each aircraft, the 548th NFS unit emblem was painted on the nose of all the squadron's Black Widows. (Robert Boucher)

a heavy layer of clouds. "We came through this cloud and there right in front of us was a Japanese Zero. I mean it was dead ahead and in a perfect position to fire a burst and before Jim could press the trigger, suddenly, the Zero exploded in a ball of fire just like you see in the movies and with no time to react, we flew right through the explosion. Fortunately, there was no damage to out aircraft. What happened was another Black Widow from our squadron was working the area next to us and he had been in hot pursuit of the Zero. He got the enemy fighter just a split second before we could fire."

This unusual encounter could have resulted in a real tragedy with a three-way collision or Gordon's aircraft coming in the line of fire just as the other one opened up. For a Zero to explode that quick was not unusual; as it was lightly armored and was described by several P-61 pilots as a "flying gas tank." That kill was credited to 1st Lt. Albert R. Sorbo and his R/O 2nd Lt. George Kerstetter. They would end their combat tour with three confirmed kills as one of the top scorers in the 418th Squadron.

When writing up his combat reports, Lt. Gordon mentioned yet another close call. This incident happened in early January 1945 when the 418th was tasked with protecting the large ship convoys. Their patrol was slated for take off at 0345 hours and just minutes into the patrol, GCI vectored them in on an unidentified bogey that was skimming along right above the water. "The intruder we were pursuing was right on top of the water and I mean just a few feet above it! There was no way we could make a normal approach from slightly below and he was moving so slow, we had to not only drop our flaps, but our gear also. We had to be careful not to overshoot and end up being the target. It was a "Jake" (The "Jake" was an Aichi E13A float plane with two crew members. It had a 7.7 mm Type 92 machine gun on a flexible mount in the rear cockpit). This plane was obviously scouting this big Allied convoy for their bombers to come in later and hit. Although we had slowed down quite a bit, we still slid up about even with him and the gunner in the rear cockpit turned the gun on us and started firing. Jim yelled "that SOB is shooting at us! And since we could not position ourselves for a kill, we went to full throttle and got out of there. We did a lot of chasing that night, as the Japanese were aggressively trying to get Intel on our ships and their positions."

The colorful Black Widows from the

548th Squadron Radar Observer Avery J. Miller (left) and his pilot Lieutenant Mel Bode pose by their *Anonymous III* on Iwo Jima. (Mel Bode)

548th NFS moved from their base on Saipan over to the newly captured Iwo Jima on 5 March 1945, even though the island was not totally secure, the night fighters were badly needed to protect the massive number of long-range P-51 Mustangs that would be operating from there. The squadron's tenure would be rather brief, as the 549th NFS was soon to arrive, and the 548th would then then be able to move closer to Japan, setting up on Ie Shima. But just a few days before they left Iwo, a very unusual situation cropped up. Iwo had become a life-saving base for battle-damaged B-29s that could not reach their home base on Saipan.

It seems that one B-29 took numerous hits from anti-aircraft fire during a bombing mission against targets at Osaka. One round came up through the aircraft, killing the pilot and jamming the bomb bay doors shut. The crippled Superfortress had to limp all the way back to Iwo Jima with bombs still loaded. The co-pilot was also wounded and bleeding but it was his job to try and get the crew and aircraft back safely. The aircraft's radio had been shot out and when it got close to Iwo, one of the patrolling P-61s piloted by Lieutenant Arthur Shepherd and his R/O Lieutenant Arvid Shulenburger spotted the bomber and radioed the situation back to base. They moved in close to the B-29 and saw that the aircraft was not capable of making a safe landing and that the crew was preparing to bail out. When the bomber was over Iwo, the co-pilot ordered the crew to bail out and eight crew members exited the aircraft. Then, the co-pilot brought it back over the island and the remaining crew jumped. Now, they had an empty B-29 with a full bomb load and a dead aircraft commander. The plan was to let it move far enough away from the island and shoot it down. Lt. Shepherd raked it over with all eight guns. It refused to go down and after putting 450 rounds of .50 caliber and 320 rounds of 20mm cannon rounds into it and

Vivacious Vivian, of the 419th NFS, is seen at the squadron's air field on Noemfoor Island in the late summer of 1944. The squadron was credited with shooting down five Japanese aircraft. (Al Lukas)

it still remained airborne. Finally, the nose dropped and it started its death plunge all the way down into the water. The B-29 was a tough aircraft to contend with, but it had to be shot down, since the bomber could have made a wide circle and run out of gas and crashed on the island, potentially destroying numerous aircraft on the ground and killing many personnel. The downing of this B-29 was one of the most unique kills in the Pacific Theater.

The 6th Squadron sent several of its aircraft and air crews to Iwo Jima to assist in getting the newly arrived 548th settled in. By this time, the 6th was the most combat experienced night fighter unit in theater. Lieutenant Myrle McCumber was one of those pilots from the 6th and he was flying in his assigned *Midnight Mickey.* At that time, the Japanese were launching aggressive and ferocious attacks against Iwo Jima, which they realized would be the main base for American attacks on the Japanese mainland.

The number of P-61 pilots that received "Probables" or "Damaged" was almost too numerous to count. If the truth were known, a significant number of night kills were counted as "probables" because they lacked verification. Gun camera film was useless at night and locations out over open water or behind enemy lines also cut down the chances that a kill would be verified. A lot of Japanese Betty bombers dropped down into a low cloud cover trailing flames and disappeared. Many never made it back to base, but the P-61 crew never saw them again or witnessed no explosion because of the clouds. The tremendous firepower of the Black Widow left the lightly armored Japanese aircraft very little chance of surviving direct hits.

Lt. McCumber describes a mission where he raked a Betty bomber with all eight guns and came out of the pursuit with only a "probable." He sets the scene for what he experienced: "The P-61 was probably the most heavily armed fighter in the U.S. arsenal during World War II. Most of our aircraft were minus the rotating top turret because of the shortage during production, so we had four .50 calibers that were fixed in the forward firing position. On this particular night we were up at 18,000 feet and were vectored toward a bogey that was down at 3,000 feet. My radar officer was Lt. Dan Hinz and he picked the blip up at a distance of 15 miles. He informed me that we were overtaking the intruder too fast and sure enough we slid by him unnoticed. I did a quick 90-degree turn to port and then a 180-degree turn to starboard. He was right above the cloud layer and since I preferred a low left side approach, I had to drop down practically in the clouds and at 1,700 feet, I got another visual and started a slight descent for the position I wanted and at that time the bogie faded from view in the darker horizon area, so I brought *Midnight Mickey* back up for an upper portside shot that put the Betty readily visible with the moon-lit cloud top as a backdrop."

"Dan began calling off the gap as we closed: 1600 feet, 1300 feet, 800 feet, and at that point I turned the gun switch on. We continued to close down to 400 feet and at that time I squeezed off a burst with all eight guns. The rounds converged right on the Betty's left wing root which was right at the center of the dimly lit circle on my optical gun sight. The target immediately brightened up as if a multitude of lights were turned on inside the Betty. I said to myself that I nailed him! We were still right above the cloud layer and I moved in very close off to the side and witnessed a massive

yellow flame that appeared to originate in the bomb bay area and quickly engulfed the forward cockpit area. The HEI's (high explosive incendiaries) had done their job. At that time, the Betty nosed into an exceedingly steep dive as if the pilots were nailed tight against the wheel and it disappeared into the cloud as we flew by. We didn't see anything after that. All we could claim was a 'probable.'" Such encounters were frequent. Without witnesses on the ground or an explosion, it could never be counted as a kill, when more than likely it definitely was.

There were a lot of replacement night fighter air crews rotating in from the United States in the early summer of 1945. Lt. John Chew was one of those pilots that joined the 421st NFS during the first week of June 1945 at Clark Field in the Philippines. He relates what his duties, as a replacement, were: "We flew night patrols around Luzon. On daylight orientation flights from Clark Field, we would try to hook up with Navy or Marine fighters and practice dogfights. Our P-61s would always do well because other pilots had great difficulty in getting the nose of their fighters ahead of us in a Luftbury. Also, in the Black Widow, we were able to stall it in a very tight turn with our flaps partially down and the wheels down and not snap roll out as many of the other fighter types tended to do. Our gunner could then swing his turret around and confront the other aircraft with four .50 calibers pointing at them.

"While practicing for our flight over to Okinawa, I was second man in a formation takeoff. My prop tips touched the metal mats (PSP) on the runway and I throttled back. My landing gear was partially retracted, consequently we bellied in and our P-61 burned on the runway with two drop tanks full of aviation gas. Fortunately, all of us escaped the aircraft without injury. Right after that a couple of us pilots got in a B-25 and flew to Finschhafen, New Guinea, by way of Palau Islands to pick up another P-61. Shortly after we returned, our squadron loaded up and moved to Ie Shima which was off the west coast of Okinawa. A funny thing happened on that flight. We took our pet monkey 'Gizmo' along and the noise in the cockpit almost drove him crazy. He got loose between the gunner's cockpit and the rear R/O's compartment and we couldn't get him out for the remainder of the flight. When we landed, we were able to get him to come out, unharmed."

The 421st Squadron, along with the other night fighter squadrons based on Okinawa and Ie Shima were constantly up at night, but at this time in the war, their focus was on hitting targets on mainland Japan. The air crews flew about one mission every fourth night, loaded with long range drop tanks and two-500-pound GP's. "To the best of my knowledge, we flew from 'Birch Strip' on the island. In addition to some night patrols, most of our effort was directed toward hitting moving targets in Japan along the coastlines. This was very near to the time that the atomic bombs were dropped (late July and early August). The bombers were hitting Japan during the daylight hours and we harassed them at night by flying over every two hours and dropping the two bombs on specific targets. The enemy (civilians and military) on the ground were not getting any rest." Lt. Chew went on to describe the final days of the war. "Toward the end, we would fly over some of the burning Japanese cities and see lots of Japanese civilians in the streets and they ignored us as we flew over at low altitude. They were almost immune to the devastation rained down on them every day. It was a sad sight to see and thank goodness the war ended quickly!"

During the final days of the war in the Pacific (before the Atomic Bombs were dropped), the Japanese were very rarely in the air because they were saving all of their assets for the Allied invasion of their homeland. P-61 squadrons were based as close to Japan as they could get at that time and many were carrying out nightly raids against targets along the coast of Japan. Just days after the bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki; there were still sporadic incidents while the Allies waited to see whether the Japanese government was going to continue the war or surrender. In the meantime, the 548th Squadron was conducting business as usual from their airfield on Ie Shima. During the final night of the war and then the night thereafter, a P-61 named *Lady in the Dark* carried out one of the greatest feats recorded by any night fighter. It was credited with two confirmed kills and it never fired a shot. On the final night (the war officially ended at 2400 hours on August 14th), Captain Lee Kendall's *Lady in the Dark,* was being flown by another crew when it was vectored in on a low-flying fast mover. In what amounted to a tree-top level pursuit, the Japanese fighter hit the water at full speed and exploded.

The following night, even though the war had ended, the 548th still put up some aircraft just as a precaution. This night, Captain Kendall was at the controlls of his *Lady* when it took off at 1910 hours for a routine patrol. Kendall recalls the mission. "Less than an hour into the patrol, the controller radioed that he had a possible bogey coming his way at an altitude of 4500 feet and airspeed of 300 mph. Closure was quick and my R/O Lt. Scheerer said he was picking up 'window' several times, which meant the bogey was using defensive tactics as he got closer to his intended target. As the distance between us narrowed, the enemy pilot initiated some hard turns in an effort to shake us. However, getting close enough for a positive identification proved to be difficult. The 'window' he was dropping was actually bundles of tinsel-like strips of aluminum foil designed to confuse our radar.

"That pilot knew we were close behind him, but I have no idea how he knew because when he first started evasive action, he could not have seen us because we weren't that close. We got down to about 800 feet when all of a sudden the left side pilot's window popped open and the rush of air drowned out the communications with my R/O. Down this low at such a high speed and not being able to understand my R/O was very dangerous. I had to back off, then close the window and then get back in touch with Lt. Scheerer. In the meantime, we had lost contact, but in a few minutes we picked him up again and I closed on his tail despite his maneuvering and dispersing 'window.' I had one eye out for the bogey and one eye on my altimeter. Without warning, that same window popped open again and I had to follow the same procedure and when I got back on him again the window popped open for the third time! Finally, my ground controller gave me permission to shoot the bogey down if I could get in firing range even though we didn't have a positive identification. We locked on again and as we came over land, the bogey disappeared and no more 'window' was detected."

According to witnesses on the ground, the enemy aircraft hit the ground at a high rate of speed and the debris was scattered over a wide area. However, there was enough left of the aircraft to identify it as a Nakajima Ki-44 "Tojo" fighter. Either the pilot had not gotten word that the war was over or he was on a suicide mission. Captain Kendall's kill was never put in the official records because hostilities between the two countries had already ended. So, *Lady in the Dark* had made the final two kills without firing its guns even though only one kill was credited. The 548th Squadron ended the war with five official kills.

The European Theater

Armorers with the 425th Squadron prepare to load 20mm ammunition into *Dangerous Dan* prior to a mission out of their base in France. (USAF)

Aerial warfare raged in the night skies of Western Europe in 1944. Even though the Germans had given up on invading England, they were still extracting a heavy toll on English cities. When the P-61 entered that conflict, the Allies were on the verge of the major landings in Normandy. The 422nd Night Fighter Squadron received its first Black Widow on 23 May 1944, just two weeks before D-Day. Its sister squadron, the 425th, got its first one on 15 June. There would only be two P-61 squadrons in this theater, but the 422nd would wind up the highest scoring night fighter squadron that the Army Air Corps had in the war (43 aerial kills).

By the first week of June 1944, the 422nd Squadron had received about a dozen Black Widows but was still under the required strength for combat duties, so it had to remain at an English airfield while the greatest invasion in history was taking place across the Channel in Normandy. Finally, on 17 June, squadron commander Lt. Colonel O. B. Johnson received permission for the squadron to begin doing some intercepts of RAF Halifax bombers that were in the final stages of advanced training. It would be good for both to get the experience. Unfortunately for the P-61 air crews, word came down at the last minute that the P-61 would not be allowed to fly night combat because it was well below the performance standards that were being exhibited by the RAF's night-fighting Mosquitos. The 422nd responded with a fire storm of protest that led to the holding of a competition, pitting the Black Widow against the Mosquito. The honor of the new Northrop fighter was at stake.

On 5 July 1944, 1st Lieutenant Donald J. Doyle, one of the most proficient P-61 pilots in the squadron, flew his aircraft against the Mosquito in the test. Both aircraft went through their demonstrations with more than an aggressive attitude. As just about every member of the 422nd had predicted, the P-61 excelled in every facet of the test. It was the fastest at 5,000 feet, 10,000 feet and 20,000 feet. It out-turned the Mosquito at every altitude and by a significant margin. Its greatest margin was in the rate of climb. Now, finally all of the obstacles had been removed and both Black Widow squadrons were cleared to fight and the politics was left far behind.

The commanding officer of the 425th Night Fighter Squadron was Major Leon G. "Gilly" Lewis, whose *Wabash Cannon Ball IV* was one of the most photographed Black Widows in the squadron. Having already flown a Martin B-26 Marauder during a lengthy combat tour in the Southwest Pacific, Lewis had plenty of combat experience. His squadron's intense training period lasted six months before they shipped out. He gives us an idea of their early history once they arrived in England. "We spent about two weeks at an airfield in Bath which gave our crews time to get used to the new P-61A models we had received. From there we moved up to Charmy Downs where we really sharpened our night flying skills

Captain Tadas Spelis (left), a pilot with the 422 Squadron, poses with his assigned Radar Observer 2nd Lieutenant Eleutherios Eleftherion in front of their P-61, *Katy the Kid,* at a forward base in Belgium during the Battle of the Bulge. (John Anderson)

by flying nightly patrol over London and the English Channel. At this time, the D-Day invasion was the featured event and all Allied close air support was focused on it. Our missions over the English Channel were flown at 30,000 feet and they were primarily meant to keep the German night fighters from attacking the beachhead in Normandy and the vast armada of ships that were in the Channel. The only action we saw was when we were chasing the deadly V-1 Buzz Bombs that were coming in over the Channel. We shot down four of them, which was remarkable in that they had the speed advantage over us."

Lt. John W. Anderson, a pilot in the 422nd, ended his combat tour with two confirmed kills of German aircraft plus one V-1 destroyed. He recalls the routine when they were hunting the "Doodle Bugs" (V-1s) in July 1944. "The Germans were launching large numbers of V-1s from hidden sites in France. They usually came in at altitudes of 2,000 to 3,000 feet at a speed of about 400mph. Our Black Widows would set up patrols in specific areas and when ground control radar picked up one, they would radio the vector to the patrolling aircraft in that area. We only had a brief period to catch it and shoot it down because once it reached the coast of England, we had to abandon the chase because the British anti-aircraft batteries would open up and we didn't want to fly through that wall of lead. Normally, we cruised at about 200 mph at 6,000 feet while we waited for a contact. Once that was made and we had the vectors, we got close enough for our R/O to pick it up on his scope (usually between eight and 10 miles distant). From that point on, the pilot would be guided by his R/O until he could get a visual and then close until we could positively identify it."

"The safest way to knock one down was from a dead astern position. Usually the V-1 was below us, so we dropped the nose and went full throttle to pick up airspeed in excess of 400 mph in order to get into firing position. Once you were set up, you could give it a quick burst with your 20mm. I was lucky in that my rounds tore into the V-1's right wing which caused it to roll over and go straight into the ground as it hit the coast of England. We got confirmation from GCI because they saw it disappear off their scope. You had to be very careful when firing on one because you could also shoot yourself down if one exploded right in front of you. One of our pilots (Lt. Herman Ernst) shot one down and his 20mm hit it in the warhead and it exploded immediately, causing him to fly through the fireball. He burned a lot of fabric off his control surfaces and he barely made it safely back to base. As the Allies pushed into France, the V-1 attacks stopped because the German launching sites had been moved back beyond V-1 range to London."

On the night of 7 August, the 425th drew blood in the form of a V-1 Buzz Bomb over the English Channel. Pilot Lt. Francis

V. Sartanowicz and his Radar Observer Lt. Edward Van Sickel were up on patrol just off the coast of France when, at 0225 hours, they spotted the tell-tale plume of flame at 3,500 feet, moving extremely fast and headed west to a target in England. It took a brief period for Sartanowicz to turn around and close the gap as the V-1 had already begun to drop in altitude. In a debriefing report, they placed the V-1's speed at close to 300 mph. However, closing the gap was no problem as the big R-2800 P&W engines responded with a surge and the fact that their Black Widow had an altitude advantage giving it more than enough take over speed. At about 600 feet distance, it was risky to fire because if the V-1 exploded, the P-61 would fly right through the fireball with all its debris. But, Lt. Sartanowicz judged the burst perfectly as they merged with the V-1 perfectly and impacted on the propulsion unit. The 20mm rounds separated it from the warhead, which fell harmlessly into the Channel and exploded in a huge fireball on impact. This was a text book hit and couldn't have been executed any better. If the aim had been a few feet further forward, their P-61 could have been damaged or could have been taken down by the resulting explosion. This was only one of four V-1s shot down by the squadron.

A few nights later, Lt. Sartanowicz had another opportunity to get a V-1. He recalls the details and his frustration at not being able to destroy it. "We were over the Channel at the optimum altitude to watch for the Buzz Bombs. It didn't take long before GCI said there was one coming in quite a ways from where we were. I went to full power and we were slowly closing the gap and just before I got within firing range, we were ordered to break off immediately and it is a good thing we did. The British had set up the most concentrated anti-aircraft gauntlet that I had ever seen and they were waiting for the V-1 to run it. When they opened fire, it was a solid wall of tracers. The V-1 never had a chance and we would not have either if we had been allowed to pursue it further. After witnessing that from afar, we headed back to base where we found it socked in with fog, so we were vectored to a special bad weather field. This strip had trenches on both sides. Gasoline was released into the trenches and lit on fire. The heat from the fire would raise the fog about 200 feet straight up. When we dropped down out of the fog, you saw two rows of fire and you headed in between them. It was like landing in hell!"

This 425th NFS air crew flew many combat missions in *The Creep*. On the left is the pilot Lieutenant George Moore, standing with his R/O (unidentified). (Jerry Moore)

The 422nd had about the same routine when they first arrived in England at Charmy Down. However, they moved quickly over to an airfield at Scorton. Once they set up operations there, they sent two detachments out to work from Ford and Hurn Airfields. From there, they flew daily missions out over the Channel in hopes of downing some V-1 Buzz bombs. During this period, the squadron shot down five of them. Black Widow ace Lt. Herman Ernst was one of the pilots that scored a kill on the deadly V-1.

"At the time, we were flying out of Ford airdrome close to Brighton. On my very first mission, I thought I had been shot down. I was diving at full speed on a V-1 when there was a loud boom. I eased back on the throttle, leveled out and realized that the aircraft was flying normally, but there was such a constant loud noise that I could not understand a thing my radar observer was trying to tell me. I immediately aborted the mission, turned around and headed back to base. Once I climbed out, it was apparent that the tail cone behind the R/O had disintegrated and the open area was causing all the noise from the wind. We put a flat piece of plexiglass in as a stop gap because the new tail cones would not

422nd Squadron commanding officer Lieutenant Colonel Oris B. Johnson (left) and his R/O Lieutenant Montgomery pose in front of their assigned *No Love! No Nothing!* They teamed up to shoot down a Fw 190 and a Ju 188. (O. B. Johnson)

be arriving for at least a month.

"The very next night I was up again and this time, I was able to complete the mission and we scored a buzz bomb kill while on patrol. It was the first kill for the 422nd and the first kill by a P-61 in the ETO. We had an altitude advantage and sure enough, this fast-moving object came across the Channel with the flame spewing out behind it. I immediately dropped the nose and gave it full throttle which allowed us to build up a good speed advantage. It was obvious as to what it was, so we didn't have to get in real close for a positive identification. I gave it a long burst with my 20mm cannons and it disintegrated when the bomb exploded."

Flying the Black Widow at night was easy to the point of being second nature for their trained air crews. But this was wartime and the fact that the Germans had a large number of experienced and highly skilled night fighters of their own made every mission very dangerous. Many of the German pilots had been flying against the British at night for years. After a few weeks of night missions, both the 422nd and 425th squadron pilots claimed that going after the V-1's was the most dangerous of targets. An exploding Buzz Bomb could easily bring down the attacker and that was a fear they had to live with.

There were several recorded incidents where an attacking P-61 moved in too close before firing the guns. One example stands out and it involved a very lucky 422nd Squadron crew. Captain Tadas J. Spelis and his Radar Observer Lt. "Lefty" Eleftherion were out on a mission in their Black Widow named *Katy the Kid*. The squadron's Intelligence Officer, Lt. Philip Guda, had requested to go along in the gunner's cockpit. Their primary mission was to patrol a certain sector in France to prevent any German intruders from crossing the Channel. On a clear night, they could see for quite a distance and nothing had popped up on the scope. Suddenly, in the distance, Captain Spelis saw the all-familiar glow that was put out by a fast-moving V-1. Lt. Guda said it looked like a full moon traveling many times faster than a locomotive and very low to the ground. Having the altitude advantage, dropping his nose and accelerating to full throttle, the P-61 overtook the V-1 in short order. The R/O said the distance was 1,500 feet and for Spelis to go ahead and shoot, but he said he wanted to make sure he took it down and continued the closure. In a matter of seconds, the distance narrowed: 1,000 feet, 800 feet, 600 feet. Fnally, at 400 feet, Spelis fired a long burst with his 20mm and a split second later all hell broke loose!

Almost instantly, there was a tremendous orange fireball that erupted. It was almost like putting a bomb in the middle of an ammo dump. The brilliant light from the explosion blinded the pilot and

the officer sitting in the gunner's station. As if his instinct had kicked in without thinking, Captain Spelis went into a steep dive and they were not at altitude before they fired, so the ground was not far off. It was a miracle that he was able to level out before crashing. The aircraft was not handling correctly, so they turned and returned to base. When they climbed out, the crew were amazed at what they saw. The left rudder was burned off as was the left aileron and half of the left elevator. There was burned fabric dangling from everything when they landed. If they had been 50 feet closer when they fired, the crew would never have survived. Their P-61 was repaired and back in action in a few days, but it was a close call.

Major Lewis, the commander of the 425th, continues: "A couple of weeks after D-Day, our ground force support personnel moved over to southern France and cleaned up a Luftwaffe airfield that had been knocked out with littered aircraft hulks scattered all over the place. When they got it usable, all of our Black Widows were flown over and we set up operations there. Our job at that time was to protect General George Patton's Third Army and that assignment stuck with us for most of the remainder of the war. We had our work cut out for us as the Germans knew what Patton's Army could do and they would be sending bombers over at night to try and slow him down. Our first test was not too far off when two German Panzer divisions were breaking loose and try to join up with other units in the Normandy area. We were ordered to load up and take them out. This was not what we had trained for as no enemy aircraft were involved. We loaded up 19 of our aircraft with rockets and 20mm ammo and went after them. We raked the tank columns that were lined up on the main road and they shot right back at us, causing us to lose one aircraft. But, we stopped them dead in their tracks and those tanks were never able to join up with the remaining force at Normandy. We were always prepared to do what we had to do to help win the war and the air-to-ground missions we participated in were very successful."

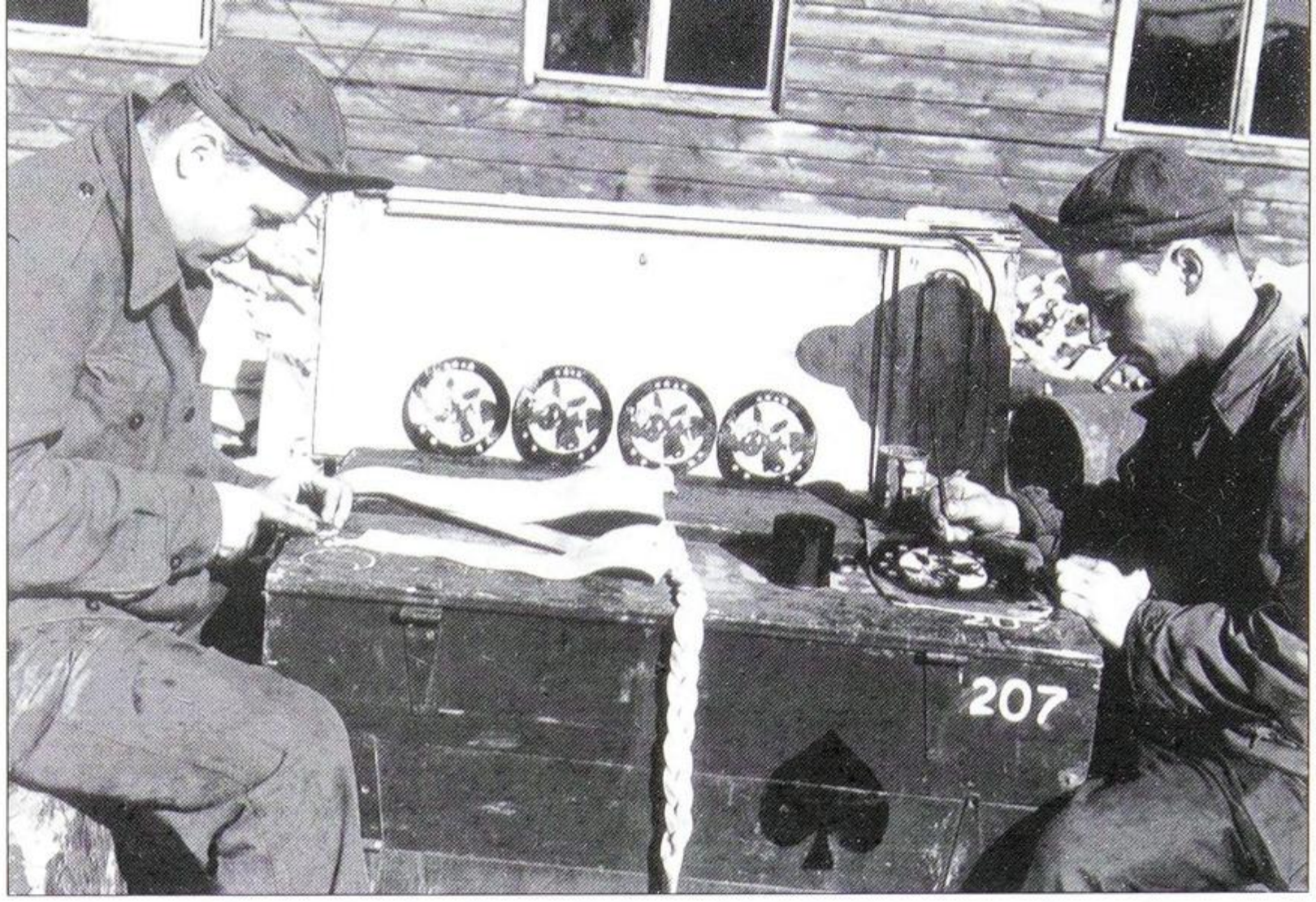
It must be kept in mind that once both Black Widow squadrons were able to move over into France after D-Day, they were operating under some of the worst conditions imaginable. Basically, they flew from all-grass landing strips that had been used by the Luftwaffe and their Bf 109s and Fw 190s. The P-61 was a much heavier aircraft and when the rainy season

Captain Eugene Lee, a pilot in the 422nd Squadron, gives movie actor Mickey Rooney some info on flying night missions in the Black Widow as they pose by *Lady Gen*. (John Anderson)

set in, these airfields were a quagmire. There were no modern control towers and very few amenities for the personnel. Most of the construction and improvements were carried out by the unit's support personnel. Take offs and landings, at night, were very dangerous. Sgt. George Hoover recalls an incident in which a couple of pilots were ferrying two P-61s from the 425th Squadron from England to the advance base in France. These two Black Widows had had some serious mechanical problems and had been left behind when the squadron moved to France. "We were on the way over to Vannes, France, to deliver the aircraft to our forward base. It is a good thing that the P-61 didn't need much distance to take off or land because as we touched down, there were a lot of people on the runway laying the PSP matting and we had to ride the brakes hard to stop. The biggest danger was the road grader they had parked in the middle about half way down the strip. There were always close calls like this, especially at night."

If all the moves that the night fighter squadrons had to make in all theaters of operations, were totalled up, the number would be huge. Just getting into the Black Widow and flying it to a newly liberated enemy airfield was the easiest part of any move. It was what went on

These enlisted men from the 422nd are busy cutting out the squadron emblem from strips of leather and hand painting the Green Bat on them. These were sewn on the A-2 jackets of the squadron members. Most of the P-61 squadrons had unit emblems, many of which were designed by Walt Disney. The 422nd, shown here, had a sister squadron – the 425th – whose insignia featured a rabbit riding on top of a Black Widow. Emblems were painted on leather removed from the self-sealing fuel tanks of German Messerschmitt Bf 110 aircraft. Neither of the night fighter squadrons in the ETO painted their emblems on the side of their aircraft as was done in other theaters. (John Anderson)



General Elwood "Pete" Quesada, Commander of 9th Fighter Command, presents an Air Medal to night fighter ace Lieutenant Eugene D. Axtell of the 422nd Night Fighter Squadron. Although there weren't many night fighter aces, a large number of the 422nd Squadron air crews received commendations for their efforts during the fighting in France and Belgium. One such citation covered just about every pilot and radar observer in the squadron on the night of 25/26 December 1944 during the Battle of the Bulge. It was presented by the commanding general of the 101st Airborne Division for the Black Widow's support when the Germans sent in a number of their aircraft to bomb and strafe his troops. The P-61s scored several kills during that period and their success during that short time insured that they would be the leading night fighter squadron of all theaters in total kills. (John Anderson)

One of the highest scoring tandems in the night fighter business, with the 422nd Squadron, was pilot Lieutenant Robert Bolinder (left) and his R/O Lieutenant R. F. Graham. They destroyed three German aircraft in one night during the Battle of the Bulge. During the course of Black Widow's tenure in World War II, there were four pilots who scored four kills each, barely missing the elite status of ace by one kill. Two of these were with the 422nd Squadron while the other two were in the Pacific (with the 6th and 418th Squadrons). The duo of Bolinder and Graham were fortunate enough to be caught up in that feeding frenzy over Belgium in December 1944. Lieutenant Bolinder's P-61 was aptly named *Double Trouble.* The 422nd was the first American night fighter squadron to see action in the ETO soon after D-Day. (R. F. Graham)

This 425th NFS air crew did very well against the Germans as it was credited with destroying one V-1 Buzz Bomb on 7 August 1944 and one Ju 87 Stuka on 24 March 1945. On the left is pilot Captain Frank Sartanowicz standing with his R/O, Lieutenant Ed Van Sickles at a forward air base in France. The squadron did not receive its Black Widows until 15 June 1944, which was nine days after the first D-Day landings at Normandy. it moved out of England to a captured, secure airfield at Vanne, France, on 18 August 1944. Up until that time, the squadron had been working over the English Channel, chasing V-1 Buzz Bombs that were headed to various British cities. (Frank Sartanowicz)

Lieutenant John Anderson (left) and his crew chief pose by his *Tennessee Ridge Runner.* They were assigned to the 422nd NFS at Scorton, England, before moving on to forward bases in France after D-Day. Lieutenant Anderson was from the Smoky Mountains in East Tennessee, hence the name selected for his fighter. During the 422nd's first full month of combat, it scored three destroyed, four probables and one damaged. These achievements were the result of 200 sorties that gave the squadron the experience it would need for the high scoring period it would soon experience. The 422nd's first operational orders put it under 21 Sector of the British Sector Control, which included the defense of the Cherbourg Peninsula and its beach head. Before switching over to 9th Air Defense Command, the 422nd covered British ground forces getting a toehold in France. Allied air power was so dominant in these areas that German aerial night attacks were minimal. (John Anderson)

Members of the 422nd Squadron prepare for the unit's move from Scorton in North Yorkshire, England, to France in late July 1944. Once they set up patrols over the Allied troops in France, the final ruling on aerial kills had to be confirmed by their GCI controllers. Most of their first contacts proved to be friendly aircraft with only infrequent chances for shooting down an enemy intruder. With the patrols coming over friendly territory, many of the Black Widows were subjected to intense anti-aircraft fire because the gunners were not willing to take a chance that they were German and give them a free pass. Just a few days into their night patrols during the first week of August, one of the air crews locked onto its first enemy aircraft (a German Ju 88), but could never get close enough to open fire on it. (John Anderson)

Tabitha, assigned to the 425th NFS in the European Theater, appears at a forward base in France shortly after D-Day in mid-summer 1944. The invasion stripes are by now starting to fade. (National Archives)

with the enlisted types in each squadron that told the entire story. As the Allies advanced closer and closer to the heart of Germany and Japan, the work load increased 10 fold and this does not include routine maintenance. During most moves, essential equipment, records, and spare parts had to be crated up and labeled, and most were loaded on ships to the next base. One of the top enlisted men in the 425th Squadron, Sgt. Tom Rose, provides some details from the enlisted man's point of view on what they had to go through.

"On or about 27 July 1944, all elements of the 425th were gathered in Scorton and we were told to prepare to go to France to support General Patton's 3rd Army. After putting in long hours getting everything packed for the move, we were then flown to Southampton where we were boarded a ship to cross the English Channel, got on an LCI and landed at the Utah beachhead, which still had an acrid, putrid smell of war. With full pack and rations, we marched for about eight miles into the French countryside, which to our amazement was disturbed very little by the ravages of war. From this point, we were transported by 6x6 trucks to a bombed out air base that had been used by Luftwaffe squadrons flying the Ju 188s and Ju 87 Stukas. Most of their disabled aircraft and equipment had been completely destroyed by constant B-17 raids. The Meucon Aerodrome was located just outside of Vannes, France. Utilizing some of the salvageable German equipment and partially wrecked buildings, the base was made ready for our P-61s

"The 3rd Army had the Germans surrounded at Brest, Lorient, and Cherbourg and it was the assignment given to the 425th to keep them from getting supplies or breaking out, which they attempted on several occasions. All of these efforts on the part of the night fighters were not without some losses. In the Battle over Normandy, we lost one P-61 and then another on a routine low-level mission against German ground targets. Believe me when I say that at this point in the war, it was a fast pace and we were hard pressed to keep up with Patton's main force. We left Vannes and Normandy and headed for Coulommiers which was just east of Paris. This put us very close to the front lines and the Germans were conducting night strikes against our base and ground troops. When they realized that the Black Widows were in the area, all of their attacks halted abruptly! From that time on, our P-61s were mostly focused on strafing the retreating German Army and anything that was moving to the east. After a couple of weeks at Reims, we packed up again and moved to our winter base at Étain, France (A-82), which was 15 miles east of the famous World War I battleground at Verdun. It was also the home of the famous 362nd Fighter Group and its P-47 Thunderbolts. A very short while later, the Germans made their last ditch effort to turn the tide of war in the Battle of the Bulge."

In August 1944, the fortunes of war were rapidly unfolding against the Germans and they had already begun a steady retreat back toward their homeland. This was only two months after D-Day and the amount of Allied air power already based in France was staggering. Another of the more successful night pilots in the 422nd NFS was Captain Raymond Anderson and his regular R/O 2nd Lt. John U. Morris. They would team up for two kills and Anderson would claim another kill using 2nd Lt. Robert Graham as his R/O. On the night of 14 August 1944, the team of Anderson and Morris took off from their base in Normandy for a regular night patrol. They were flying in a P-61A-10 named *Lovely Lady*

(s/n 42-5573). They reached their assigned area at 2235 hours at an altitude of 10,000 feet. It didn't take GCI long to inform them of an unknown approaching from the east at 12 miles out at an altitude of 9,000 feet. Lt. Morris obtained a lock on at five miles out and at that time the intruder was flying at 190 mph while taking mild evasive action. Captain Anderson continued closing down to 400 feet where he obtained a positive identification. It was a lone Ju 88.

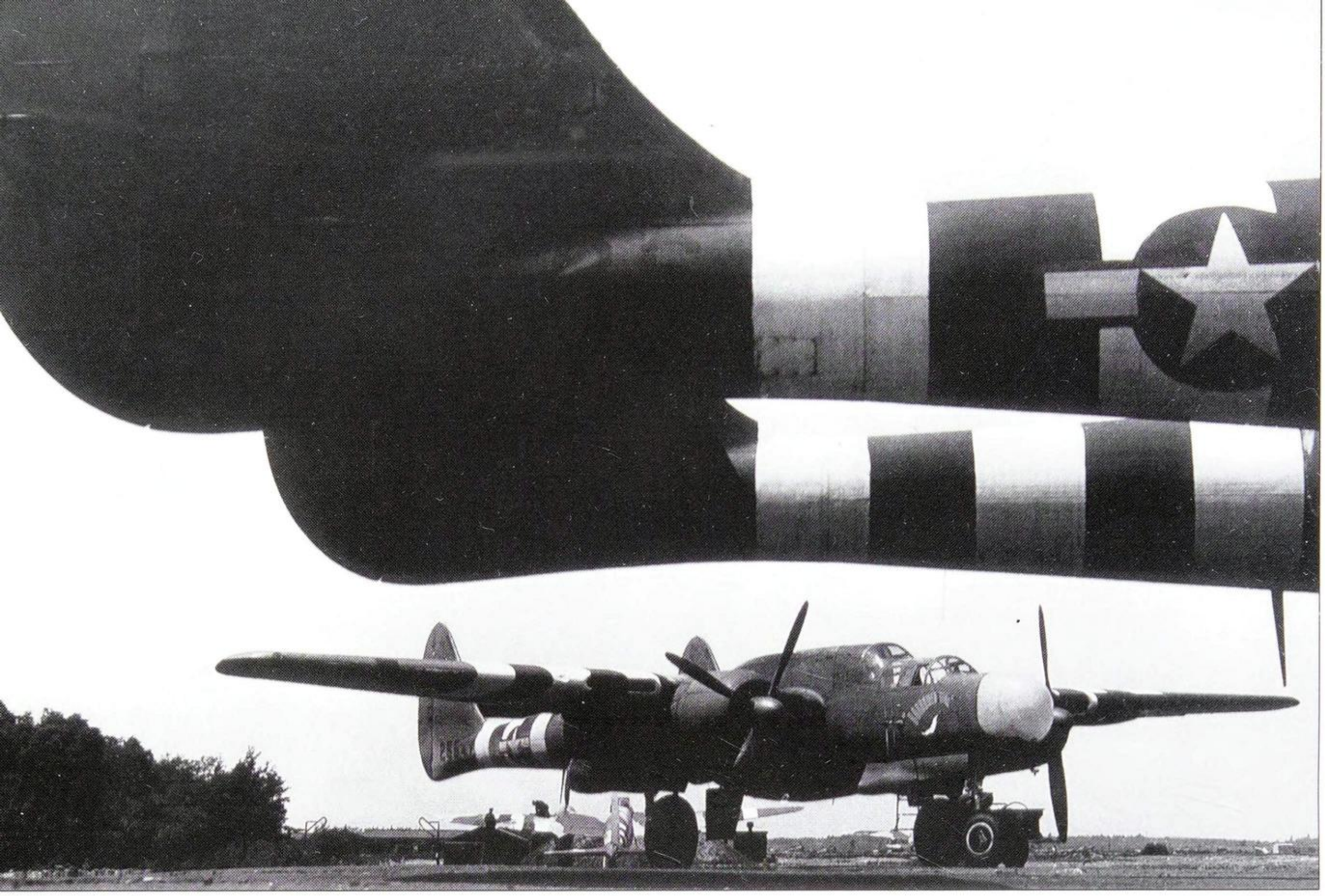
Backing off to 500 feet, Anderson gave the bogey a long burst of 20mm dead astern. His aim was perfect and large chunks of the fuselage blew off and the target immediately began dropping window and he peeled sharply off to port diving down quickly to about 5,000 feet. The pursuing P-61 lost visual, but the interception continued because Morris still had him on his radar scope. They closed again to 500 feet and fired another burst from slightly below and dead astern. This time, there was no wriggle room and as the Ju 88 slid out of control, it suddenly exploded into a fireball. No parachutes were observed and the kill was officially listed in the report at 2230 hours. *Lovely Lady* stayed up to finish its patrol, making only a couple of contacts, neither of which panned out. Anderson returned the aircraft to base at 0020 hours, having accomplished one of his eventual three kills of the war.

Captain Earl W. Bierer was one of the senior night fighter pilots in the 425th because he had come to England in the fall of 1941 as a pilot in the RCAF. He saw, first hand, what the RAF was accomplishing in the night fighter role he immediately volunteered to go into a training squadron there. He did time in a Hurricane Night Intruder Squadron and flew with them until September 1942. With the Army Air Corps ginning up its night fighter program, so he moved back home to join that venture. When his training was complete, he joined the 425th Squadron in time to make the initial move to England. He comments on the unit's early days in England around the time of the D-Day landings. His comments echo those made by 425th commander Major "Gilly" Lewis. "On 1 July 1944, I was given orders to take six Black Widows, air crews and support personnel to Ford Airdrome to operate with the RAF's Squadron 96 on Buzz Bomb patrol," Bierer recalls. "During that deployment, we did have some good luck knocking them down and were complimented by the RAF.

Soon after our sister squadron went over

Lieutenant Herman Ernst is awarded an Air Medal for outstanding night missions while flying with his 422nd NFS over France. He was one of a very select group of P-61 night fighter aces. (Herman Ernst)

to France, we moved *en masse* to an airfield at Vanne, France (A-33). The first day we were operational there, we were called upon to go on a daylight strafing mission to stop a break through from Lorraine to Saint-Nazaire. We shot up a lot of German assets and were credited with stopping the break through but we lost one of our P-61s and its pilot. They were shot down by heavy flak. Our opportunities to engage night flying Luftwaffe planes were slim, but our intruder missions were very successful. We destroyed a significant number of locomotives, rolling stock (boxcars) and trucks. As we moved deeper into France, we had to keep at least two Black Widows on patrol at any given time and there was no interruption. Any of our aircraft that were not part of this were sent out in intruder missions. The combat air patrols were flown at altitudes that ranged from 8,000-15,000



These 422nd NFS Black Widows, seen here at their base in England, have just received their D-Day invasion stripes and are ready to go out after the V-1 Buzz Bombs. Future ace Lieutenant Herman Ernst's aircraft *Borrowed Time* is in the center of the photo. (John Anderson)

feet over the front lines. However, the intruder missions were much lower and down about 2,000 feet. At that altitude, we stayed out of small arms fire and at an optimum height to spot movement on the rails and roads below. Our P-61 air crews were finally credited with 10 aerial kills and we had a significant number of 'probables.'"

The 422nd was the first night fighter squadron to move across the Channel and the 425th followed a short time later. From that point on, they almost lived out of duffle bags and wooden crates because the lines were so fluid. Both units were willing to move as many times as it took to get a crack at enemy aircraft. Right after D-Day, the hunting got difficult because there were so many Allied aircraft up during the day that the Luftwaffe had pulled back to airfields in Germany and the extreme eastern edge of France. Although there were numerous encounters with German night bombers, it was rare to see a dogfight between the P-61 and German aircraft in the daytime. One of the most unique situations involved the commanding officer of the 422nd, Lt. Colonel Oris B. Johnson. Late in the afternoon (almost twilight) of 24 October 1944, he took off in his P-61A named *No Love! No Nothing!* with his Radar Observer Captain James Montgomery. It was to be a last light patrol in hopes of catching some enemy aircraft before it got dark. At precisely 1805 hours GCI checked in and informed them of several enemy aircraft approaching from the east at 4,000 feet. From his perch at 10,000 feet, Johnson dropped down to check it out, but saw no aircraft where they should have been, so he climbed on back up to his regular patrol altitude.

A few minutes after resuming the patrol, GCI came on the radio and said that it had multiple bogies again and this time they are at 5,000 feet. Johnson immediately plummeted down to that altitude and this time, he saw a very unusual sight; three Foke-Wulf Fw 190s loaded down with bombs. This German fighter was the Luftwaffe's top of the line dogfighter, capable of speeds in excess of 400 mph and armed with two 13mm machine guns and two 20mm cannon. Without a bomb load, it would have been a formidable match for the P-61. All three of the intruders were on a heading of 270 degrees, flying a straight and level course with airspeed of about 250 mph. It was evident that they were looking for Allied troops to bomb. Johnson peeled off and headed into them and in seconds they spotted him and two of the 190s broke off and scattered. Unfazed, Johnson focused on the leader.

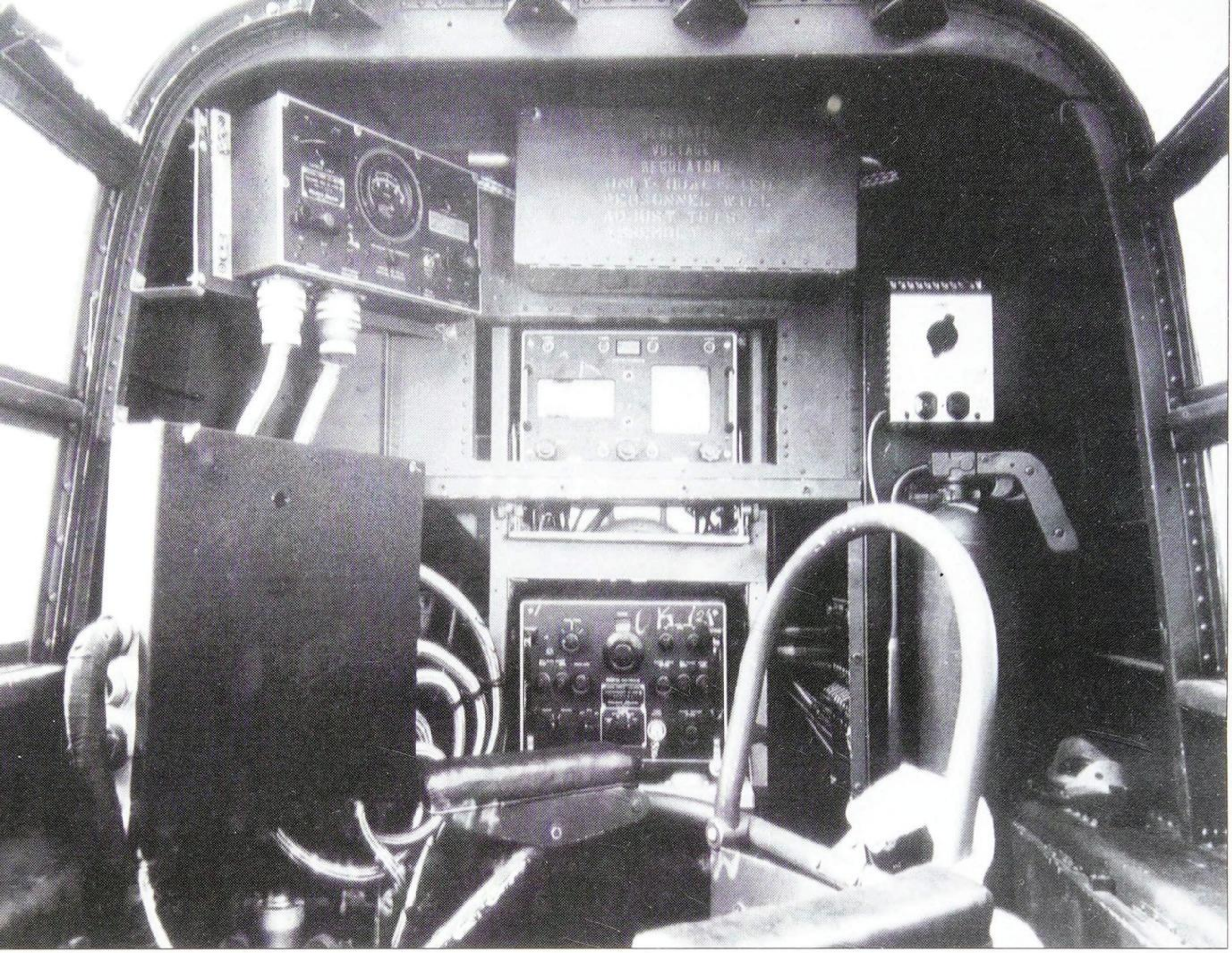
The closure rate slowed at 1,000 feet. Dead astern, Johnson opened fire with two short 20mm bursts. Strikes were observed on the Fw 190's right wing as it drifted into a slow turn to port. By this time, the distance between the two had narrowed to 500 feet. Johnson's thumb increased pressure on the gun's trigger, letting go with a long five-second burst. This time, it was point-blank! The rounds raked the stricken fighter from one end to the other and it was this burst that proved to be fatal. Black smoke billowed out from the engine and the aircraft fell off into a vertical dive. At 2,000 feet altitude, the pilot made an effort to pull out before hitting the ground, but his efforts were futile and the Foke-Wulf impacted the ground with a violent explosion. By this time, Johnson was so low that he was taking light, friendly fire from the troops on the ground. He initiated a quick pull up out of harm's way and continued

The 422nd Squadron became the leading scorer of all American night fighter squadrons during the Battle of the Bulge. These 422nd Black Widows are parked at their base in Belgium during that scoring spree. The P-61 on the far right is *Lady Gen*, assigned to ace Lieutenant Paul Smith. (Robert Tierney)

patrolling for 15 minutes before heading back to base. The crew chief gave *No Love! No Nothing!* a quick going over and the only damage was several bullet holes that were from small arms fire after the kill. There was no doubt that the bomb-laden Fw 190s were looking for the very troops that fired on Johnson's Black Widow. Fortunately, the other two enemy fighters scattered out and headed back to the east and the safety of their own lines. This was one of only a very few occasions where the P-61 was able to fight an enemy aircraft when there was still ample light. Official records recorded by the 422nd show that they had three confirmed kills of Fw 190s, all of them were between 21 October and 17 December.

After having flown several lengthy patrols without coming close to getting a kill, the night of 26 November 1944 proved to be a winner for 422nd Squadron pilot 1st Lt. Robert Bolinder and his R/O, 2nd Lt. Bob Graham. They took off from Florennes Airstrip (A-78) in Belgium around 2030 hours. Lt. Bolinder describes the mission as it unfolded. "As soon as we were airborne, we switched channels to our ground control radar. Their call sign was "Marmite." We climbed to 10,000 feet and started a routine patrol over the city of Koblenz on the Rhine River. About 30 minutes of uneventful patrolling under Marmite's orders, we were finally vectored on a chase. After 15 minutes of getting close enough to get an AI contact on our radar, Lt. Graham guided us in close in an effort to see what the mystery aircraft was. When I saw the silhouette of what looked like a Heinkel He 111, I couldn't believe my eyes. The intruder, which was now a bandit, was flying at 8,000 feet in a northwesterly course. Since I was in such complete shock, I flew close enough (beneath and to the starboard side) to it to make sure we both agreed on what it was. We both knew when we saw the German Cross painted on the side of its fuselage. At that time, we dropped back to a distance of 400 feet astern with the '111 about 5 degrees above us.

"I fired a short burst with my 20mm and got good strikes on the right wing root. Nothing seemed to happen, so I fired a second burst from the same position. In a split second, the target blew up in front of us and I had to peel off sharply to avoid the debris from the explosion. Now, everything was quiet again and we resumed our patrol. This had been our first confirmed kill. But, the night wasn't over for us because just a few minutes after shooting down the He 111, we received another call from Marmite that put us on another chase. It didn't take long for Bob to pick it up on his radar. We locked on and the unidentified intruder was flying in an east-northeasterly direction at about 7,000 feet. His speed was constant at 120 knots. When we got in close, it appeared to be a small personal transport type. I got in very close to let Bob take a look at it as I had no clue as to what it was. He didn't know either, so we had to let it go. In our Intelligence briefing after the mission, our Intel officer jokingly told us to "shoot first and identify later." Of course, we could never do that because there were a lot of our aircraft up at night, especially ones returning from night missions. After the war was over, that same Intel officer told me that he had learned that the unidentified aircraft we had let go was a small Czechoslovakian transport aircraft



Many of the squadrons flew combat in the Black Widows that were not equipped with the top .50 caliber turret, thus leaving the gunner with nothing to do. Many units moved the radar compartment from the rear to the gunner's station, right behind the pilot. This 425th Squadron P-61 has the SCR-720 equipment placed forward. (Garry Pape)

about the size of a C-45 and it was not hostile at all. It was lucky that we held our fire that night."

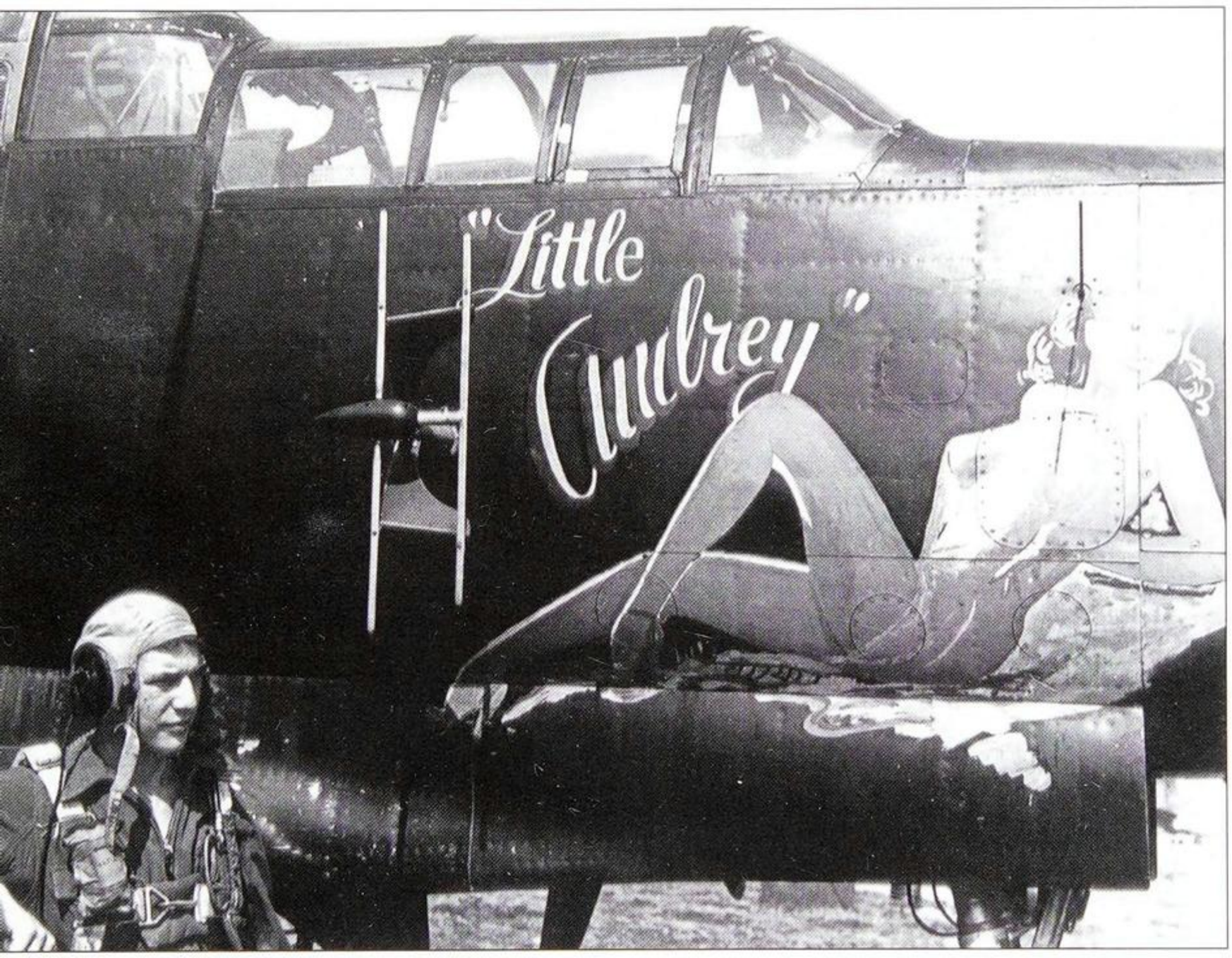
Most all fighter pilots that flew in the ETO during the war will bring up the subject of the bad weather conditions that seem to be a daily reality over Germany and France during the winter months. Black Widow crews would have had a far greater kill rate if the weather had been decent between December 1944 and February 1945. Although they could "see" at night, when the German pilots knew they were being pursued, they could easily escape a P-61 by ducking down low and getting lost in the ground clutter and low ceilings. Both of the ETO Black Widow squadrons were at a disadvantage on many of the pursuits. On 18 December 1944, a large number of P-47s from the 428th, 429th, and 430th Fighter Squadrons (474th Fighter Group) had been fighting an equal number of Messerschmitt Bf 109s with losses on both sides. The weather was closing in late that afternoon and the P-47s made one last sweep during which they spotted a lengthy train wending its way to the east. The P-47s dropped all of their ordnance and then headed back to their base at Florennes, Belgium. Darkness settled over the entire region and it was time for the P-61s to take up their positions over the front lines and beyond. The 422nd NFS shared the base at Florennes with the 474th Group. The weather had turned nasty over Belgium and their base was quickly covered in a thick icy fog, but with the German break through, the night fighters had very few choices and sitting this one out was not one of them.

The 422nd went ahead and got four P-61s airborne right before the fog brought the conditions down to zero-zero. The four aircraft would not be able to recover at this base. When the time came for the patrols to end, two of the Black Widows were allowed to divert to St Trond, Belgium (A-92), while the other two were refused landing clearance due to a dogfight between a Ju 88 and a pursuing RAF Mosquito. 1st Lieutenant Roy Siegle and 2nd Lieutenant Bernard "Bob" Orzell were flying one of the night fighters that were not allowed to land. Lt. Siegle vividly recalls the action.

"That night the fog was so thick a flashlight beam stopped less than two feet away. About 0100 hours, the fog lifted enough that we could take off from Florennes and we were immediately vectored toward the front lines by ground control. This led to several frustrating chases with various hostile intruders and unidentified aircraft. There were searchlights all over the place and plenty of anti-aircraft fire and we were flying right through the middle of it. Eventually, we had to break off and start for our home base as fuel was becoming a concern and as we got close, we were told we couldn't land because of the dense fog. This led us to St. Trond where we were told to stay away because they were being attacked. Our only alternative now was at A-84 which was a day fighter field

This 425th Squadron Black Widow is operating from a forward base in France some time after D-Day. Squadron records show that (No. 42-5570) was flown by at least five different air crews in the course of a three-week period. (USAF)

Night fighter ace Lieutenant Paul A. Smith takes time out for a photo opportunity in the cockpit of his *Lady Gen.* The kill symbols under the cockpit include locomotives. He was one of only four 422nd NFS pilots that achieved the coveted status of ace. Both night fighter squadrons that operated in the ETO had their hands full as they were tasked with several types of mission. On nights when the Luftwaffe was not flying, they went after any road or rail traffic. With the Germans fighting on two major fronts, there was always activity on the ground as evidenced by the number of locomotive kills painted on this P-61. (Paul Smith)



One of the 422nd Night Fighter Squadron pilots poses by a squadron Black Widow that has just received some striking new nose art. *Little Audrey* was one of the more colorful aircraft in the squadron. Every one of the 422nd NFS Black Widows was pushed to the limit, a circumstance that put a heavy burden on the squadron maintenance personnel. Many of the aircraft came back from strafing missions with bullet holes that had been inflicted by small arms fire. Many more kills could have been achieved had it not been for some mechanical failures at the wrong time. In one particular incident, a 422nd pilot locked on to a Junkers Ju 188 but when the American opened fire, only the first two or three 20mm rounds discharged. The problem was that the nose landing gear door had not completely closed and the first rounds hit the door, breaking the firing circuit on the guns. It would otherwise have been a sure kill, since the aircraft was in perfect position and the bogey had been positively identified. (Fred Stegner)

One of the pilots of *Shoo-Shoo-Baby* was night fighter ace Lieutenant Robert O. Elmore (right), seen here with his radar observer Lieutenant Leonard F. Mapes (left) of the 422nd NFS. They were credited with destroying four German aircraft and one V-1 Buzz bomb. Records from the 422nd credit the unit with three confirmed kills and one probable during October 1944. It also destroyed two locomotives and 140 rail cars, causing numerous secondary explosions on trains headed west in support of German troops fighting in France. Their P-61s were involved in 131 intercepts directed by ground radar operators while obtaining visuals on 68 of them. Of this number, almost half were friendlies. Evasive action and marginal weather enabled most of the enemy aircraft to escape. (John Anderson)

The 425th Squadron commander Major Leon "Gilly" Lewis flew this P-61 named *Wabash Cannon Ball IV*, seen here being serviced by his ground crew at its base in France. (USAF)

with no runway or searchlights. While we were *en route,* GCI came on and wanted to vector us onto a bogey, but I replied we were short of fuel but wanting to make a kill forced me to give it a try. We did make AI contact, but never got a visual. I broke off and headed for the small airfield at A-84 and we were cleared to land.

"When I asked what the visibility was, the only response was to line up on the flares being sent up at the end of the runway. I made a pass through the flares at 100 feet but there was no visibility. I made a second pass at 50 feet and a third pass at 25 feet and when I pulled up , I said what is the damn visibility? I was finally told that we were facing at zero ceiling with less than 10 feet of visibility! Now, my fuel lights were glowing red and I told my R/O to bail out, but he told me we could make it, so I told him that on this pass, we had to land regardless of what we encountered. I might add at this point that if my P-61 had not been equipped with a radar altimeter, I would not be here telling this story. To add to our concerns, as I made my approach, I heard our other P-61 come on the radio and he was trying to get in to the same place as me. Nobody had warned me of another aircraft in our immediate vicinity."

The pilot of the other P-61 was Lt. Don Allee from the 422nd Squadron. He asked Lt. Siegle if it was possible to get into the airfield and he told him to get some altitude and bail out. That was the last anyone heard from Allee and his R/O. In the meantime, Lt. Siegle was on final, lowering his wheels and flaps as he came through the flares at about 110 knots and still no visibility! Seconds later, his wheels touched the ground. Just as he reached for the switches, his aircraft hit a metal fence which wiped out the under carriage throwing him up through the escape hatch with his face in the dirt and his legs caught between the rudder pedal, the wheel and the fuselage. He had to be cut out of the wreck where he was rushed to the nearest hospital. Lt. Orzell, the R/O was unhurt.

"For about 30 minutes, the rescue services at A-84 were unable to locate the wrecked P-61 because of the dense fog. With a serious back injury, I was sent back to the States for medical treatment and discharged. Lt. Allee tried to get to another base but never made it. They crashed four miles from A-84, killing the crew. For the next three nights, the weather continued on as the 422nd was kept on the ground while more pleas were made for the long-range drop tanks that did not arrive before I was moved out. For the next few days, only a few P-38s were able to get airborne but the low ceilings prevented them from being effective. In the meantime, the German ground forces continued to advance in the "Bulge" with no interference from our fighters because of the weather."

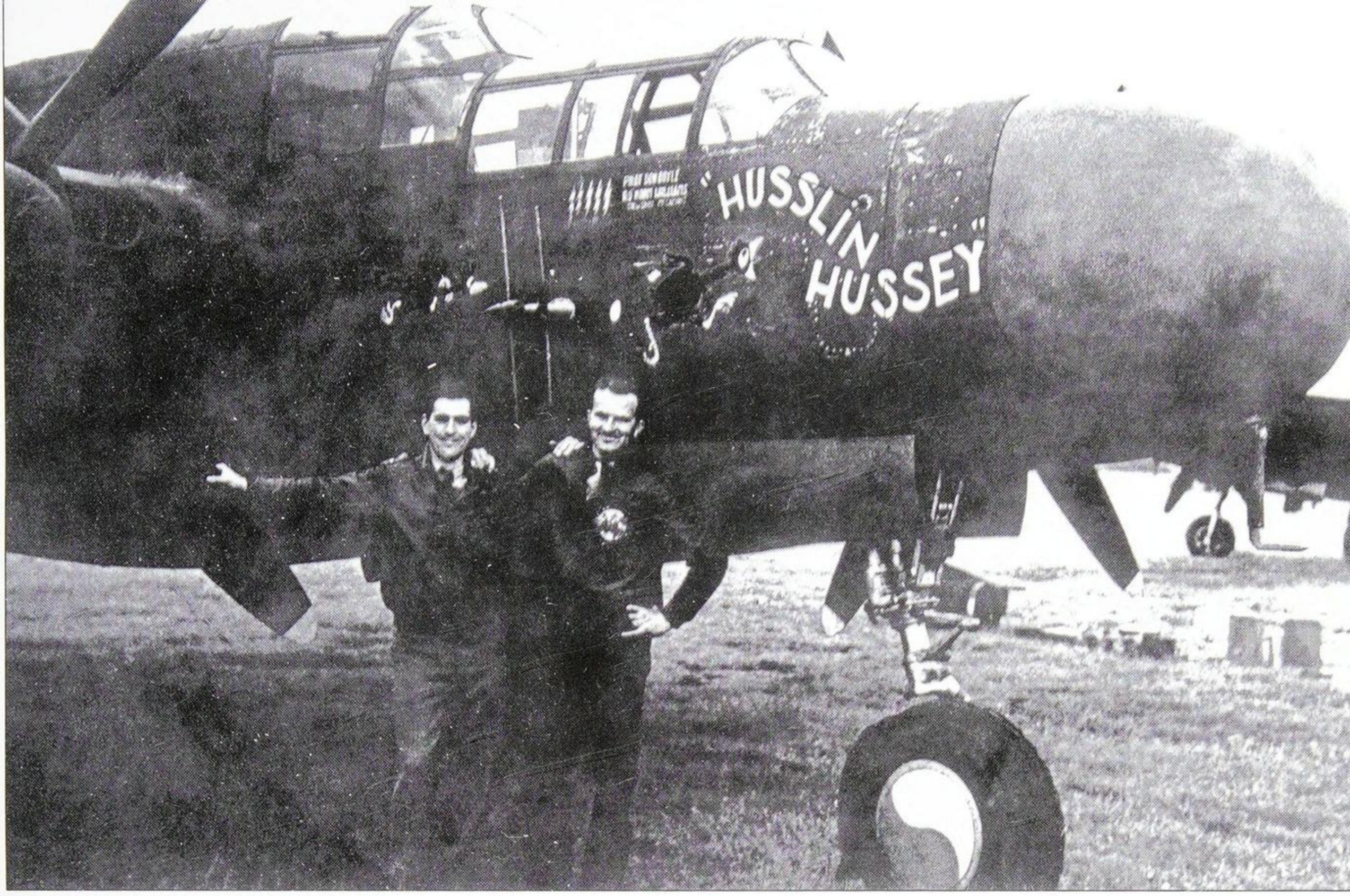
As the number of their aircraft dwindled, the Germans continued

Ace Lieutenant Herman Ernst and his radar observer use a two-seat bicycle to get more quickly from the operations shack to the flight line. They are probably suited up for a V-1 hunting mission. The 422nd's Black Widows were scattered out over a wide area. (John Anderson)

to do some flying at night because it gave them a little more of a safety factor. The daytime skies over France and western Germany were flooded with Allied fighters. The two Black Widow squadrons, based in France, were on opposite ends of the spectrum when it came to being in the best position for night kills. One of these, the 425th, was ordered to protect General Patton's advances and this meant doing a lot of low-level strafing and bombing while their sister unit, the 422nd, was in a position to clean up in the aerial arena while going much lighter on the air-to-ground night work.

The 425th's march into Western Europe was steady after D-Day and it stayed as close to the front lines as possible. According to Radar Observer Doug Hinkson, the squadron stayed in a mobile stance for several months. "My section left England and arrived at an Airdrome at Vannes, France (A-33), on 27 August 1944. From there we picked up all of our equipment and moved to Coulommiers (A-58) on 25 September. A month later, we pulled up stakes and moved to Reims (A-79) on 13 October. Less than four weeks later, we were ordered to move up to Étain (A-82) which would serve as our permanent base almost until the war ended. On 12 April 1945, we did make our first move into Germany at Frankfurt Airfield (Y-75). I left the squadron in late June 1945 and that was just after we settled into Fürth Airbase, Germany. We had to be very mobile to keep up with the advancing troops and it put our enlisted personnel carrying a heavy workload by packing and unpacking and keeping as many of our Black Widows in-service as possible."

During the Battle of the Bulge, the 425th was in high gear. They were called on to fly both day and night missions and their tremendous firepower was sorely needed. Lt. Hinkson remembers a close call they had on a day mission. "I was flying with pilot Lt. Walter Stacy in our P-61 that went by the name of *Patches.* It was 29 January 1945 during the heavy ground fighting in Belgium. It was a day mission to strafe highways that the German ground forces were being forced to use. On this day, the weather was overcast, so we had a very low ceiling to work under, but we had enough room to extract a heavy toll of enemy vehicles and personnel. We came up on a small village that the Germans seemed to have a big interest in. We came in with our 20mm cannon firing and we must have hit something that had been a major munitions storage building because we witnessed a massive secondary explosion. At that same moment, some 88s opened up on us and one of the rounds hit our aircraft. Lt. Stacy pulled back immediately as we disappeared into the cloud layer. We both asked each other if we were o.k. and he



Husslin Hussey **is assigned to the 422nd Night Fighter Squadron. (John Anderson)**

stated that the controls were messed up and he was going to try and nurse us back to base, which he did. When we got out of the plane, it was evident that we had caught some flak, because the vertical stabilizer was filled with holes, which explained the problem with the controls. When Stacy saw the damage, he stated that if he had known that, he and his crew would have bailed out

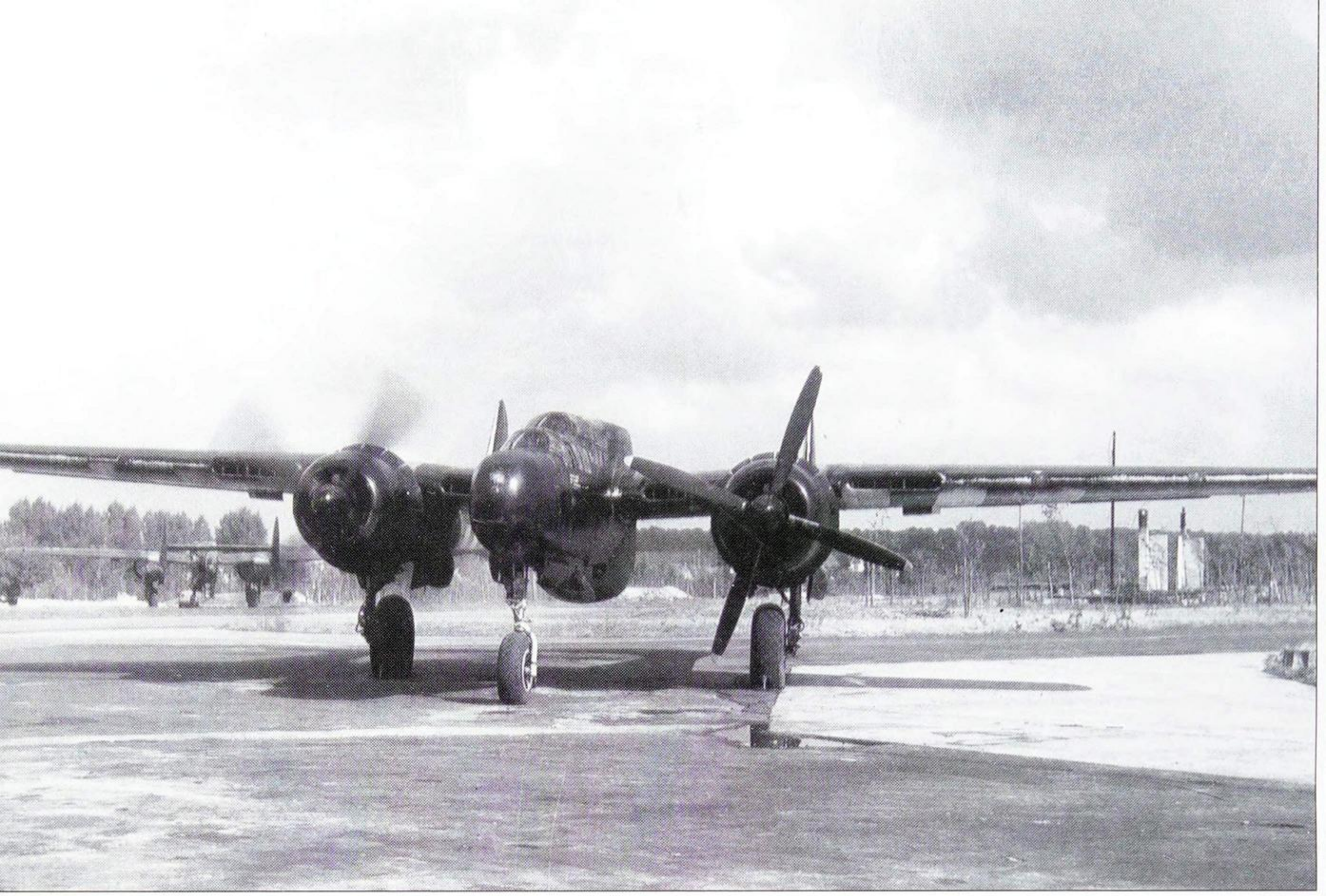
"In drumming up more details of this mission, I recall that on one stretch of road before we hit the village, that the highway was loaded with cars, trucks, and tanks. It was a major gaggle of rolling stock. They were all in retreat back toward the German border. The impact of our 20mm cannons was unbelievable because the trucks and cars just rolled over into the ditch as our rounds tore into them. As we made our way back to Étain, Lt. Stacy had to fight the controls for about 200 miles. We had to get up to 10,000 feet in order to stay clear of any anti-aircraft fire and with the undercast, we did not have any visual ground markers to guide us back, so we had to use our radar for the navigation."

On 16 September 1944, the 422nd Squadron began getting established at their forward base at Florennes, Belgium (A-78). This move would put them in a position to rack up a huge number of kills a few months later during the Battle of the Bulge. Future ace Lt. Herman Ernst recalls a mission he flew on the night of 27 November 1944. "On this night, I took off with my R/O Edward Kopsel for a defensive patrol between the front lines and the Rhine River. We were at 10,000 feet about an hour into the mission when GCI called that they had an unidentified intruder at 4,000 feet about 20 miles out from us. I dropped the nose into a full power dive which brought me down to 3,500 feet. We closed on the target pretty fast and I maneuvered into position about 2.5 miles out. My R/O had already locked onto it as he called out the distance of closure. When we were about 1,400 feet out and 15 degrees above, I accelerated a little more which put us at about 800 feet out and it was in this position that we got a positive identification on a twin-engine Messerschmitt Bf 110, flying at about 200 mph on a course of 200 degrees while holding at an altitude of 3,700 feet.

"I was in perfect position for firing so I gave the hostile a two-second burst with my 20mm. From this range, there was no doubt about the outcome as I observed numerous hits on his fuselage and wings. I still had a slight speed advantage, so I narrowed the gap down to less than 600 feet before giving it another longer burst and that one impacted his port engine and wing root. Before I could react and slow down, the Bf 110 exploded, so some of the rounds probably hit his fuel tank in his left wing. There were pieces of the aircraft flying all over the place! What was left of it, rolled over on its port side and went down through a cloud layer. Now this was turning into a very dangerous situation for us because the overcast was about 3,000 feet above the ground, so we could not safely follow the stricken aircraft down to confirm the kill. Fortunately for us, the friendly troops down on the ground were able to confirm the crash. They described it as a huge fiery ball that came down through the clouds and hit the ground."

P-61s that appear in photographs taken at bases in France, often sport kill symbols other than the swastika. Some of those aircraft feature profiles of locomotives, trucks, and V-1 Buzz Bombs. These symbols prove that the night fighter air crews were adept at strafing moving targets at night and that their 20mm cannon gave them the firepower to take on any German target.

One of the night fighter aces was Lt. Eugene D. Axtell, a pilot in the 422nd NFS. He gives us the details of an encounter with a heavily guarded train during a night mission while flying his famous Black



One of the 425th Black Widows starts its starboard engine prior to take off from the squadron's base at Coulommiers, France, for a routine patrol at last light on 27 September 1944. (USAF)

Widow nicknamed *Battle Ax*. "At first we were on a routine patrol, at 12,000 feet," he recalls, "hoping to lock on to an unsuspecting German aircraft, but there wasn't much air activity that night and we were over their homeland. As we cruised right above the cloud layer, there were occasional breaks where you could see the ground and due to an afternoon bomber raid, some of the villages below were still burning. Suddenly, the clouds below became luminous. This indicated that the Germans had, for some reason or another, were lighting up a closed-in airfield by throwing searchlights to a point in the clouds, but there was no evidence of a potential target trying to land there. At that time, GCI came on the radio that there was an unidentified moving target close by. I closed on it and determined that it was a friendly, so nothing came of it.

"We continued our patrol at the designated 12,000 feet and there seemed to be no hostiles in the air at least in my sector. As the first flicker of light started showing on the eastern horizon, I called the controller and told him to vector us back to base which he did. It is an uncomfortable feeling to be over enemy territory as a single ship knowing that they had a lot of accurate flak batteries on the ground. About halfway back to base, I spotted a train moving pretty fast and heading east. We were still over enemy territory, so it wasn't friendly. I dove at about a 45-degree angle coming in from the rear. With a good rate of speed, I nosed *Battle Ax* up slightly and began firing my 20mm and she shook from the vibrations of all four guns spewing a long burst. Suddenly, bright cherry-red flak came up at us from the left and within a couple of seconds, my plane bounced about 100 feet upward. My R/O yelled for me to "get the hell out of here" which I did. As I gained some altitude, we looked back and the entire train had blown up in a massive fireball which indicated that it had been loaded with ammunition. Destroying that train made the long monotonous patrol well worth it."

As Lt. Axtell got close to his home field, the tower informed him that there was a ground fog settling in on the edge of the runway and by the time he got in the landing pattern, the field was socked in tight. He made several futile passes trying to line up with the runway but couldn't do it. Ground personnel were lighting flares and sent up a rocket, but it did no good. The only alternative was to get lower and try to make out the tree line and by this time, all the red lights were showing on the fuel gauges. Axtell said he was going to make one more low pass and if that didn't work they were going to bail out. As he dropped down, suddenly some of the mist parted and right below them at a sharp angle was the runway and at this point, his flying skills manifested themselves as he made two incredible vertical banks at what seemed to be zero altitude. As he executed the turns, he let out the flaps, pulled the nose up slightly and slammed down on the runway. As he climbed out, he commented to the crew chief that he thought he had pranged it for sure, but upon close examination, the aircraft was repairable and would fly again. It was skills like these that eventually placed him in a very small and elite fraternity: night fighter ace.

The 425th continued with a heavy role in going after any troop movements or rolling stock anywhere in the vicinity of General Patton's advancing tank columns. The constant pressure that Patton was putting on German ground forces was tremendous and as some German forces were in retreat, other units were trying to move up to the front from deep in Germany in an effort to stop the Allied

A 425th Squadron armorer loads cannon rounds into the belly of this night fighter at Étain Air Base in France. Enemy aircraft, locomotives, gun emplacements, and truck convoys kept the Black Widow's 20mm guns working overtime. (USAF)

advance. Since all this movement took place during the hours of darkness, it did nothing but provide lucrative targets for the 425th. Several of the squadron's Black Widow pilots excelled at killing moving targets on the roads and rails at night. In late fall of 1944, the Germans were secretly building up for a major offensive that was their last chance to blunt the Allied march to Berlin. Lieutenant Alvin "Bud" Anderson was one of those sharp-shooting pilots who loved to work the railroads. Fortunately, the Black Widow was perfect for hunting locomotives, because its four 20mm cannon had the needed knockout power and it did not have to rely on heavy bombs. Anderson remembers one night's mission as one of the best that he flew and it was probably the best air-to-ground mission that the squadron had flown up to that point. "I was flying in my favorite P-61 named *Dangerous Dan* and both of us took to train busting rather quickly because it was so dangerous and the most effective altitude of attack was very low, which put us at the mercy of small arms fire. The fact that the engine could blow up right in your face added a lot of risk because the explosion could bring us down as we flew over it. On one cold night, my radar observer Lt. John Smith and I were on a routine patrol in our designated sector at 15,000 feet with nothing showing on his scope. Both of us were looking down to see if there was any movement on the ground."

"Suddenly, we spotted what appeared to be a large convoy about 15 miles east of our position. I immediately split-S'd straight down to about 500 feet. We were deep inside German territory, so there was absolutely no hesitation on my part. I went across that line of movement with all four 20mm blasting away. As we pulled up from making the first pass, we both realized that we had stumbled upon a major marshalling yard and there was plenty of activity all over it. I cut the pull up short and made a hard turn to go back around as quickly as I could and as I lined up for another firing pass, I saw four locomotives spouting steam from holes created by my 20mm rounds. One of the engineers, in his haste to abandon his engine, failed to turn off his headlights. I concentrated on that light and fired another long burst."

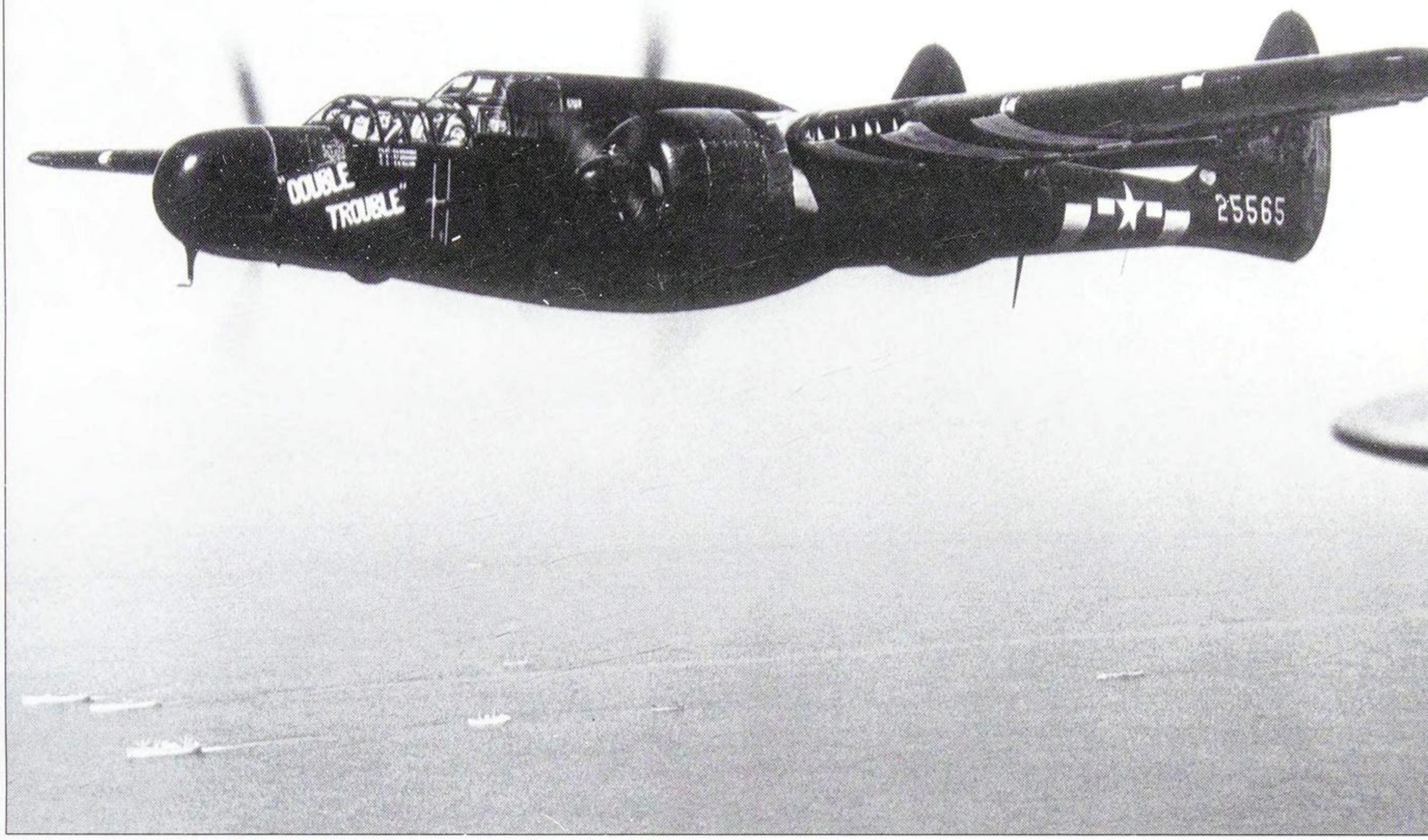
"Focusing on the light had mesmerized me and the only thing that brought me back to my senses was the screaming in my headset. It was my Radar Observer and that woke me up in time to pull up and as the nose of my aircraft pulled up, the locomotive below us exploded. Its violent force catapulted us several thousand feet straight up with me fighting the controls all the way. Finally, able to get it under control, I was able to radio back to GCI and tell them about the lucrative target we had stumbled on to. That gave them time to notify the nearest bomber unit so they could hit the yards at first light."

Early that next morning, a photo-reconnaissance aircraft was sent

Lieutenant Raymond Anderson, a 422nd pilot (left), and his R/O, Lieutenant John Morris, pose in their flight gear in front of ace Lieutenant Eugene Axtell's P-61 during the Battle of the Bulge, when the squadron was operating out of Florennes, Belgium. By December 1944, each of the 422nd Black Widows had at least 300 hours of flight time, and the efficiency of their SCR-720 radar systems had been reduced by about 30% due to heavy use. During the five months that the squadron had been operational, it had received only one replacement aircraft. Although Northrop production was working at its peak, most of the new P-61s headed to the Pacific to equip the squadrons that were being activated there. (John Anderson)

General Elwood Quesada (far right) pays a visit to some of the 422nd Squadron pilots and radar observers in the early spring of 1945. On the far left is P-61 ace Lieutenant Eugene Axtell. Second from the right is 422nd Squadron Commander Lieutenant Colonel O. B. Johnson. Both of the night fighter squadrons that served under the control of 9th Air Force received extensive recognition and praise from High Command, because they did a good job of protecting Allied assets during hours of darkness and in bad weather. The 422nd NFS established several "firsts." The squadron was the first to operate the P-61 in the European Theater of Operations; it was the first to shoot down a V-1 "Buzz Bomb"; it was the first American night fighter squadron to carry bombs; and it was the first night fighter squadron to chalk up three confirmed kills in one night. Most of the pilots give credit for their unit's success to the leadership of their squadron commander, Lieutenant Colonel Johnson. The unit shot down its first enemy aircraft on the night of 7 August 1944 and bagged its last kill of the war on the night of 13 April 1945. (John Anderson)

Ground crew members of the 422nd NFS take a break from work on *Midnight Menace* at a base in France. While the 422nd was operating from a base in Belgium, it had to contend with very bad weather in the months of December and January. Some aircraft were lost while trying to land in zero-zero conditions. On one occasion, a pilot tried to land at one of these bases when it was under attack by a Ju 88 with a British Mosquito on its tail. The American was diverted to another base that was fogged in and after three tries, he landed quite a distance from the runway and the aircraft had to be written off. (John Anderson)



Lieutenant Robert Bolinder, a pilot with the 422nd Squadron, patrols over Allied ships bringing supplies to France a few weeks after the D-Day landings. He was credited with his first kill on 26 November 1944 while operating from a base in Belgium. (Robert Bolinder)

out to take pictures and when it returned and the film was processed, it revealed that Lt. Anderson had destroyed five locomotives. It also showed that he had stumbled on to the huge rail complex at Kaiserslautern. Needless to say, the next day, Allied bombers leveled anything that had not had a chance to clear out. The craters in that yard were so close together that there was nothing left. This target had been on German soil and from that time on, all of the P-61 air-to-ground missions were deep inside Germany.

Around the same time of Lt. Anderson's lucrative mission, an air crew from the 425th also had some good hunting. The pilot was Lt. Frank Sartanowicz, who had just returned from a two-week stint as Liaison Officer from the 425th Squadron attached to General Patton's headquarters. On his first mission back, while on patrol, he received a radio message from one of the other P-61 pilots indicating they had come upon a lot of rail activity around Trier, near Germany's western border. He explains the events as they unfolded. "Once I received the message, I was vectored into that area as fast as I could. Arriving overhead, I found more than a half dozen trains blocked from entering a tunnel either from previous bomb damage or too many trains in the tunnel. The Black Widow that had just worked them over left some of the rail cars burning, so it was easy to get a fix on the exact location.

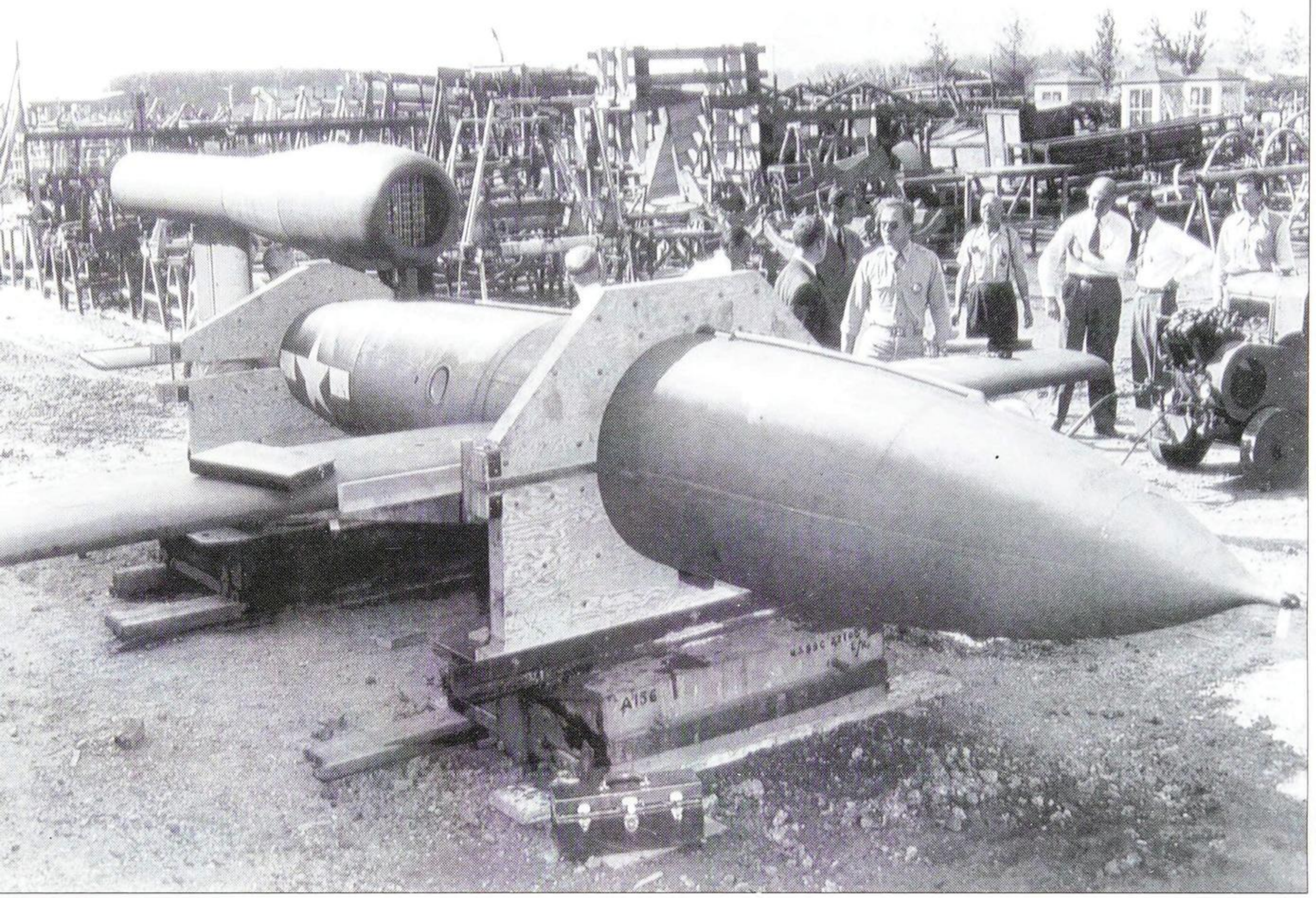
I took my time and made several passes firing all eight rockets and dropping the two large napalm tanks in addition to firing my 20mm.

"I returned to base and the ordnance crews were waiting to reload me as quick as possible. My second mission went the same way and then several other 425th pilots joined in against that big rail jam. There was no way to tell what was destroyed because of the fires and the dangerous mountainous terrain. It was only through later Intelligence reports that we learned the full scope of our efforts. Sometime later, we found out that our target was an entire Panzer Division that had been diverted from the Eastern Front in preparation for the Battle of the Bulge. We had destroyed so much of that unit that they were never able to get into the action in Belgium. There is no telling how many Allied troops were saved because of our efforts that night."

As many of the pilots mentioned, it was the crew chiefs that kept the Black Widows ready to carry out the night missions. They put in long hours and many pulled double duty because of the squadron's aircraft constantly coming in from patrol during the night and getting others ready to launch to fill the slots that had just come open. These aircraft had to cover a wide, 360-degree area every night to protect their air bases. The Germans were forced to try to do what damage they could during the hours of darkness, which were safer for them.

One of the 425th Squadron crew chiefs was Sgt. Roy "Barky" Barraclough. His main responsibility was a P-61 named *Bunny II.*

Bunny II achieved what Barraclough regards as perfection on one particularly overworked night. "We had a lot of Black Widows in our squadron but they weren't all in the air every night. A good percentage of them were slated for specific patrols each night while others were undergoing maintenance. Most of the missions lasted between two and two and a half hours and quite frequently some



A Fieseler Fi 103, better known as the Vergeltungswaffe 1 or V-1 Buzz Bomb, is seen here being shipped to the United States after the German surrender. The V-1 carried a 1,870-pound warhead and had a range of 150 miles, but only made it to its intended target 25 percent of the time. More than 4,000 such flying bombs were destroyed in the air by barrage balloons, fighters, and anti-aircraft fire. Black Widows knocked down a number of the V-1s over the English Channel. (Republic Aviation)

of them developed problems on take off or early into the mission and they had to abort and return to base. That meant another Black Widow had to be ready to fill in. Most of the difficulties were related to problems with the SCR-720 radar.

"On one night, my assigned P-61 *Bunny II* flew four missions with no problems. Each time, it was flown by a different crew and when one would land, I would be there to check everything out and make sure it was refueled and ready. At that time, I notified the Engineering Officer when I felt it was ready and he would send another pilot and radar observer out. On that night, there was a lot of action and most of our flyable aircraft were in the air at one time or another. When the sun came up, mine was the only one still in service and ready to go again. It was a strain on me because my assistant had been assigned other duties and no one knew we were going to be that busy. It was a remarkable feat for my P-61 to be able to be in-service for that length of time without anything serious developing. It was a great airplane!"

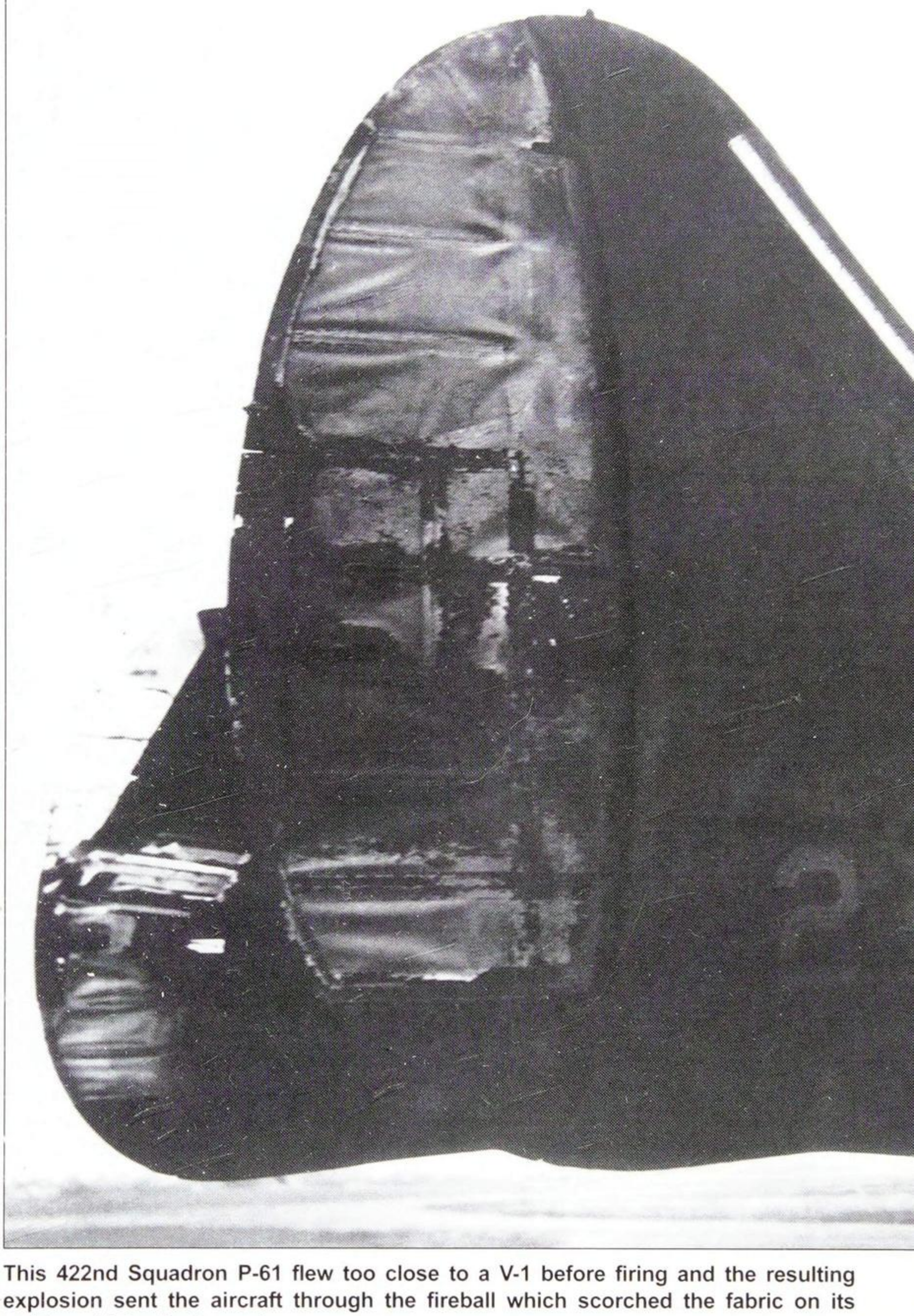
There were many types of Luftwaffe aircraft that were capable of flying effectively at night. Probably one of the rarest was the Messerschmitt Me 410. It was a hot rod with two engines that could churn out a top speed of 388 mph and had a range of 1,400 miles. It was equipped with lethal firepower (four machine guns and two 20mm cannon). One of the 425th pilots tangled with one but was not able to close and make the kill. Lieutenant Van Neiswender recalls the mission and the frustration he felt when the Me 410 pilot pulled away after his P-61 ran into problems in the pursuit. "This mission demonstrated to me just what a good pilot in the '410 could do. My R/O Lieutenant David Parsons and I were out on a late night patrol in our Black Widow that carried the name *Daisy Mae.* We were assigned a sector that was all around Bastogne and I remember that there was a full moon out that night so the visibility was excellent. The first two hours into the mission were dull and uneventful. After that, things started to heat up as GCI called us and said that a bogie was coming into our sector and we were vectored close enough to get a lock on."

"As soon as we had him on the scope, the intruder did nearly a half roll and dived for the dark wooded area below us. I pushed the throttle wide open and the chase was on. I had not come up on anything that could outrun our Black Widows and this was a fight that should be put in the record books. We stayed close to him, but not close enough to fire the guns and besides, we had to get in so we could get a positive identification on it. We finally closed the

gap so we could get a silhouette and it was a Me 410. This pilot had his airspeed over 400 mph and was rapidly pulling away from us. He knew we were on him before we got close enough to see him. I had my aircraft wide open and it was like we were standing still. Moments later, we lost radar contact and a few seconds later, before I slowed down, the tail cone behind the R/O's compartment caved in from the pressure! We had no choice but to go back to base with no chance to fire the guns. It was a very frustrating mission that had lasted three hours and 10 minutes. We made it back to Étain (A-82) with no further problems."

In late 1944, it seemed that the Germans still had a heavy inventory on the Junkers Ju 87, Ju 88 and Ju 188 because they were using more of these than any other type of aircraft on their night intruder missions. Fortunately for the 422nd Squadron, their move to Florennes, Belgium (A-78), proved to be one of the best moves that any night fighter unit had in the war because they would be the closest to the Battle of the Bulge when the Luftwaffe was in a night flying frenzy. In fact, business was so good that one of the Mediterranean squadrons (the 414th) sent a detachment of its new P-61s up to help out. 422nd pilot Lt. Robert Elmore and his Radar Observer 2nd Lt. Leonard Mapes were among the most prolific "Hun hunters" in the squadron, by the time the war ended, with four confirmed kills of manned aircraft and one V-1 Buzz Bomb.

At 0313 hours on 17 December 1944, Elmore and Mapes were assigned to patrol an area that would buffer VII Corps and the Rhine River. As expected, the weather was bitterly cold but visibility was excellent. The Battle of the Bulge officially started on the night of 16-17 December, when fierce ground battles erupted as the Germans made their last ditch effort to turn the tide of the war in their favor. There was a lot of enemy air activity as there was every night during the Battle of the Bulge. GCI, with the call sign "Marmite" was kept busy that night because there were numerous intruders coming in from the east. Captain Elmore states, "We were vectored toward several bogies, but were not able to get close enough to any of them to fire our guns. Marmite gave us a vector toward an intruder that was only four miles away at a lower altitude than us. After letting down in a wide orbit, to keep from over shooting, we got a lock-on with our radar and the target was less than five



This 422nd Squadron P-61 flew too close to a V-1 before firing and the resulting explosion sent the aircraft through the fireball which scorched the fabric on its rudders. (John Anderson)

miles ahead."

"I gave the P-61 more throttle and it quickly closed the gap down to 1,000 feet. At this distance, we were able to get a visual but not a positive. We rolled on up to 500 feet and identified the bogie as a Ju 88. It was flying on a heading of 270 degrees at 4,000 feet. Knowing what our four 20mm cannon were capable of doing, I eased up to 100 feet dead astern and opened fire with a short burst. It caused a bright white explosion inside the fuselage. Maintaining my position, I put another longer burst that walked all over both engines. Fire erupted from both of them instantly. For a couple of seconds, the enemy aircraft went into a gradual climb, then fell away to it port side, dropped its nose straight down in a fireball and hit the ground with a huge explosion. We were at a very low altitude

when I started firing, so it didn't take long for it to impact. No parachutes were seen to open and it was a confirmed kill. I noted that the kill happened at 0330 hours, so the pursuit and shoot down lasted a total of 17 minutes."

Many military historians state that the Ju 88 was probably the most versatile aircraft that the Luftwaffe had in inventory in late 1944. It had not only been very successful on day missions, but had also adapted to the role of night fighter. The Ju 88 went through a complete re-design and the new version became known as the Ju 188. This new model could easily operate above 27,000 feet with speeds better than 270 mph. A large number of these aircraft were serving as German night intruders when the P-61 became operational in Europe. That they were no match for the Black Widow can be seen from the records of the 422nd Squadron, which list 10 Ju 188s and 10 Ju 88s shot down by the unit. Records researched by 425th pilot "Bud" Anderson show that of the 10 kills of manned aircraft his squadron posted in the war, half of those were Ju 188s and most of these were shot down while they were trying to interfere with General Patton's advances (which were being protected by the 425th). The reason for both squadrons' success against the Ju 188 was that the German aircraft was forced to operate at very low altitudes and slow speeds that made it vulnerable to the P-61's guns.

Due to the constant nightly air traffic that the Germans were throwing up, the 422nd stayed busy by sending up a large number of its Black Widows every night to patrol a wide area with only one aircraft in each specific sector. The only danger of a mid-air collision was with an enemy aircraft. On the same night that Captain Elmore got one of his kills (17 December 1944), future night fighter ace Lt. Herman Ernst was working the sector next to Elmore in his olive drab P-61 named *Borrowed Time*. Both pilots had the same orders: to act as a buffer between ground forces below and the Rhine River. The situation on the ground was forcing the Luftwaffe to send everything it had aloft over the front lines at night. After several frustrating chases that failed to yield a positive identification, Lt. Ernst resumed his patrol back up at 10,000 feet, the optimum altitude for pouncing on low-flying intruders. He recalls the events as they unfolded. "GCI called us to report an intruder coming into our area at 4,000 feet at a distance of about 20 miles. I rolled over

This 425th Squadron Black Widow is operating from a forward base in France some time after D-Day. Squadron records show that (No. 42-5570) was flown by at least five different air crews in the course of a three week period. (USAF)

in a shallow power dive to 3,500 feet. A few minutes later, we were locked on to the bogie that was about two miles ahead of us."

"We continued to narrow the gap until we got down to 1,400 feet and 15 degrees above. I kept the throttle steady: 800 feet and closing. At this point, I made a positive on the unknown aircraft and it was a Messerschmitt Bf 110 (one of the fastest German fighters, it could hit about 350 mph with a crew of three and a range of over 1,700 miles) that was flying at 200 mph on a course of 200 degrees and his altitude had dropped down slightly to 3,700 feet. He was unaware I was behind him and he was squarely in my sights as I squeezed off a two-second burst and observed multiple hits all over his fuselage and both wing roots. There was no mistaking the twinkling of 20mm rounds impacting on metal. But, nothing seemed to be happening, so I closed into 600 feet and got off another burst and this time the rounds hit his port engine. A split second later, there was an explosion that sent pieces of the '110 all over the place. What was left of the aircraft rolled over to the left and down through a thick overcast, which was at 3,000 feet."

The terrain in this area was not familiar to Lt. Ernst, so he was hesitant about following the doomed German aircraft down through the cloud layer and he figured it would be

Winter conditions during the Battle of the Bulge were at their worst. The ground crews from the 422nd Squadron did an outstanding job of keeping their Black Widows in the air. These crew members are getting ready to clean the snow off of the planes before they are prepped for the night's missions. (Herman Ernst)

suicide to risk it. The action had taken place right over Allied troops on the ground and they confirmed that a ball of fire had popped down through the overcast and crashed into the ground. There were no chutes, so the three-man crew was probably killed during Lt. Ernst's first burst that raked the fuselage or when the aircraft exploded. It was a solid kill that moved Ernst closer to acedom.

Lt. Bolinder walks us through the chain of events on *Double Trouble's* big night. "At first, we were chasing unidentified aircraft all over the place and each proved to be friendly. At last, we were vectored in on an unknown that was coming our way and it was about 50 miles behind the German lines, so that meant it was probably the enemy. We were just about at 10,000 feet with a cloud layer below us and bright stars above. At full throttle, we quickly closed on the target until we were 500 feet behind him. However, there was a major problem in that I could not see well enough to get a positive identification on it. Lt. Graham kept telling me that it was at 12 o'clock and 10 degrees. At last I realized that what I thought was a star moving gently back and forth was actually a single-engine Fw 190. The star that I thought I saw was that aircraft's exhaust. This would be the first-single engine fighter we had encountered. Moving closer, I could see the German cross on the side of its fuselage. I backed off and lined him up, firing a burst but didn't notice any strikes. For a second I thought my gun sight had malfunctioned, so I started to "rake" the target with a long burst of 20mm." I noticed numerous hits on one of his wing roots and at that moment the pilot peeled off to the left and entered a cloud bank. As we didn't see the Fw 190 crash, we were credited with a probable."

At that point in the evening, *Double Trouble* finished its patrol responsibilities and returned to their base about 2 A.M. Not long after they had landed, Lt. Bolinder and his R/O were asked to fly another sortie, so at about 3:30 a.m. they got airborne again and before long Marmite notified them of heavy enemy air activity all over the frontline positions and all were at an unusually low altitude (1,500 feet or lower). Once they arrived in the area, they became involved in several low-altitude chases, with Lt. Graham calling out multiple contacts. "Lt. Graham's work was extremely difficult because we were at such low altitude and that produced a lot of ground clutter on his scope. Nevertheless, he guided me to a visual that I quickly identified as a Bf 110. One quick burst from my guns and the intruder went straight down into the ground. It could have been a quick evasive maneuver by the pilot before he realized he was so close to the ground."

"We didn't have time to celebrate another kill because Graham got another blip on his screen and he had a lock-on, This bogie was very close to us, so a couple of minutes at full power and we got close enough for a confirmed visual. It was an He 111 that was working very low, so we slid in behind it to set up a no-miss shot. One long burst that engulfed the fuselage and one wing root caused the '111 to explode into a fireball and immediately plunge straight into the ground. We were so low that the crew did not have time to get out if they had survived the 20mm hits. Every enemy aircraft that was flying that night seemed to be flying right above the tree line. I can only assume that they were trying to support their troops and were being careful to stay below our GCI radar. This had been

our second confirmed kill of the night."

Lt. Bolinder's night patrol was not yet over. A few minutes later, another blip popped up on Graham's scope. Like the last one, it was close to their position, so it didn't take long to move in close, but this time it was more difficult to get a visual. While making a hard starboard turn, Bolinder caught a glimpse of the intruder, another He-111. Getting the positive identification almost was overkill for both of them. "In that tight turn, we got so close to the '111 (a matter of inches) that I thought we brushed wings as we both were in the same turn. Fortunately, as I eased up, he nosed down and I never saw it again. Lt. Graham saw him go into a steep dive and with our altitude so low, he probably did not recover. We counted it as a kill, but were only credited with a "probable."

After that close call, Bolinder sensed that *Double Trouble* was not flying properly and he felt it was a result of the possible bump with the He 111. Rather than take a chance and not knowing the extent of any damage, Bolinder aborted the patrol and returned to base. There the crew chief joined the crew in making a close inspection of the P-61 but found no damage. This left the crew with two confirmed kills and two probables. However, the story of this mission does not end here. Two months later, Lt. James Postlewaite, a pilot in the 422nd, was on a rest leave in England and having dinner one night with an officer that had been assigned to an engineering company. They began exchanging war stories and as it turned out, this individual had witnessed a German pilot bailing out of his aircraft on the night that Lt. Bolinder had an Fw 190 probable. The location had the same grid coordinates as the one where he had hit the '190. So, two months after that mission, the probable was upgraded to a kill which gave the crew a very rare triple kill on that night. They had come very close to joining that elite fraternity of aces.

Lt. Bolinder received the Distinguished Flying Cross and the Silver Star for the extraordinary mission. His citation read as follows:

"ROBERT G. BOLINDER, 1st Lieutenant, Air Corps, 422nd Night Fighter Squadron. For gallantry in action on the night of 16/17 December 1944. Between the hours of midnight and dawn, Lt. Bolinder piloted his aircraft on two sorties over the heavily defended Cologne Plain; and in the course of his long, arduous mission, he destroyed three enemy aircraft and probably destroyed a fourth. By his superior aerial proficiency and tactical technique Lt. Bolinder was instrumental in the accomplishment of this unique aerial feat, thereby reflecting the highest distinction upon himself, his organization and the Army Air Forces."

The potential of the new Black Widows had not gone unnoticed by the U.S. Navy. There was no chance of the heavy night fighter being able to operate from the aircraft carriers, but the Navy's interest was strictly for its Marine Corps. In mid-1942, when the P-61 was still being developed, the Navy sent word to Northrop that it would be interested in obtaining about 200 of the finished aircraft and would need them some time in 1943. At the time, the Marines had not yet landed on Guadalcanal, so the Navy had no idea how desperate their need for a night fighter would be until late 1942.

In early 1944, the production "A" models had not yet begun

422nd Commander Lieutenant Colonel O. B. Johnson poses in the cockpit of his *No Love! No Nothing!* prior to flying a early evening (dusk) mission. His first kill was recorded on 24 October 1944 when he shot down an Fw 190 at last light. The German fighter was loaded with bombs with the intent of hitting Allied ground troops. (Fred Stegner)

422nd pilot Lieutenant John Anderson (left) demonstrates the crude conditions that all members of the 422nd faced at their advanced bases in France. There were no officer's clubs or Quonset huts to shelter them from the weather. (John Anderson)

to pour off the assembly lines therefore the Navy was still waiting for the fulfillment of its request. At that time, the Army Air Force notified the Navy that if they got any of the new night fighters, it would be in very small numbers and nothing like they had originally requested. In anticipation of obtaining a few P-61s, the Marines went ahead and began establishing a night fighter training group. The spearhead of this program began when Lt. Colonel Martin A. Severson (USMC) and six enlisted Radar Observers were sent over to England to work with the 425th Night Fighter Squadron. When they arrived, their first stop was to attend the RAF Cranfield night fighter training facility. About one month after their arrival, five more Marine pilots joined them. This would be a critical deployment for these officers because they had to master night fighter tactics and intercept techniques before returning Stateside. These air crews were allowed to fly combat missions with both the 422nd and 425th Night Fighter Squadrons. At this point, the Navy was hoping to take at least 25 Black Widows a month when production of the "A" models got into high gear.

While the Marine cadre was in England, plans were being made to send a significant number of Marine enlisted men to the AAF Technical Training Unit that had been established at Northrop's factory in California. Sgt. James P. McGarry, USMC, was one of the Radar Observers who were sent over to the two squadrons flying in the ETO. He recalls some of his combat in the Black Widow while flying with a very experienced pilot, Lt. Colonel Severson. "Our very first mission in France, on the night of 6 August 1944, was from a crude strip near Sainte-Mère-Église and involved a night patrol west of Cherbourg at the unusually low altitude of 7,000 feet. For some reason or another, it seems that there was a lot of nightly traffic over this area by the big Fw 200 transports. Intelligence told us that they thought the aircraft were evacuating German troops from the Guernsey and Jersey Islands.

"We set up patrol and waited, but there was very little air activity that night. After an hour or so of patrol, GCI said they had a slow-moving blip that was coming into our area. I picked up a radar contact on my SCR 72- airborne radar at a distance of seven miles. I gave my pilot the directions to get us in close and we came in behind and beneath at 10 degrees port. We closed down to 300 feet and I advised that if we got any closer, we would lose him on our radar. At that instant, out of the corner of my eye, I noticed what

422nd pilot Lieutenant Leonard Koehler (left) and his R/O Flight Officer Louis Bost (right) pose with movie actor Mickey Rooney right after they had given him a quick ride in *Sleepy Time Gal*. (John Anderson)

appeared to be snow passing over the starboard side of our Black Widow. I called Lt. Col. Severson on the intercom and said that it looked like its snowing out there. His reply was 'Snow, hell! Those are tracers and we're being fired on.' We had intercepted a British Short Stirling bomber that was returning from a night bombing mission in Germany. Lt. Col. Severson took quick evasive action and we moved out of the tail gunner's vision. If we had not been required to get a visual, that bomber would have been hosed down with 20mm. The rules of the road in those days, for the bomber crews, were to shoot first and ask questions later. IFF, although a great aspect for identification for GCI, did not function too well between airborne aircraft. We were afraid that we might have taken a few rounds, so we dropped down and landed at a small unmarked airfield to check it out. We had the engine nacelles checked out and then took off for the return to our main airfield."

For the remainder of August, the Marine air crews flew on a regular basis over central and eastern France in hopes of locking on an enemy aircraft, but they only had one opportunity. On 14 August, this same Marine air crew was vectored toward a fast moving intruder and it took a while for them to get close. As soon as they were able to get a visual, the bogie went into violent evasive action and the contact was broken visually and on the scope. They were never able to get a lock on and the Heinkel He 111 got away unscathed. The remainder of their patrols were uneventful although the flying weather was absolutely perfect. French nights turing July and August 1944 were rather quiet as compared to what the Black Widow crews would face when the Battle of the Bulge began toward the end of that year.

Unfortunately for the Marines, they never received enough P-61s to form up an operational squadron. They did get enough to set up a training unit at Vero Beach, Florida, however. The P-61s that were received for their training were designated F2T-1s. This marked the first time in history that Northrop had been able to bring in one of its aircraft for Marine Corps use. These aircraft did not last long in the training program and were phased out in favor of the new Grumman F7F-3N Tigercat, which was a specialized night fighter carrying a pilot and radar observer. These new aircraft would last long enough to see plenty of action in the Korean War whereas the Black Widows were long gone from all military inventories by 1950.

Decembers in Europe can be brutal and the Allied ground troops in Belgium experienced this first hand. It was just as bad for the German troops and the Luftwaffe pilot trying to resupply and protect their own. With this in mind, it is easy to understand why so many kills were made that last week of December 1944. Army Air Corps records show that the 425th Squadron team of pilot Lt. William A. Andrews and his R/O Lt. James E. Kleinheinz got credit for two kills. On the night of 23-24 December the 425th launched seven P-61s for interception patrol in the Saarbrücken / Metz area. They were assigned to protect General Patton's forces.

It didn't take long for GCI to pick up a bogey and they immediately dispatched them to intercept. Lt. Andrews closed to

1,000 feet and got a visual. The target was flying straight and level and they approached slightly below to get a positive i.d. They got close enough to see the German Cross painted on the fuselage and saw that it was definitely a Ju 88. They dropped back to 300 feet slightly below the intruder, firing a quick burst and observing strikes on the '88's fuselage. Its pilot made a sharp turn to the left which set Andrews up for a perfect deflection shot. These rounds impacted between the left engine and fuselage. At that point, the aircraft burst into flames and went into a steep dive. They followed all the way down to 5,000 feet, but in a vertical dive like that, if they had followed any further, they couldn't have pulled out in time. The Ju 88 went straight into the ground. It was clean kill and four nights later, the same team would latch on to another Ju 88 with the same results. They were officially credited with two kills during their stint in the squadron.

On that first night, there were more than enough contacts made to go around. Andrews and Kleinheinz were vectored on to two additional contacts on the night of the 23rd. Both contacts were enemy aircraft that outmaneuvered them in the dark by getting low or disappearing into thick cloud banks. Lt. Kleinheinz stated that they looked for parachutes on both kills and did not see any. With their 20mm hitting the fuselage, chances are the pilots were either disabled or dead as neither took any evasive action. At the time, they were operating out of the airfield at Étain, France.

On the night of 26-27 December, just one day after Christmas, the 422nd found itself in the middle of a major German aerial circus. Their area over Belgium was saturated with enemy air activity in a futile effort to help the beleaguered Wehrmacht ground troops. The squadron shot down three Ju 188s, one Ju 88 and one Bf 110 on that night. Ace Lt. Herman Ernst, who got a confirmed kill on one of the Ju 188s, recalls how the mission went. "We took off for a patrol between the front lines and the Rhine River. The Germans were doing everything they could to prevent our troops from crossing the river, which would allow the Allies to pour into Germany. We were first vectored onto what ended up being a Ju 88 piloted by a very experienced pilot. We lost him after he had taken several violent evasive maneuvers and then we were guided in on several others with little or no luck and up to this time, we had not gotten close enough to fire our guns.

422nd pilot Lieutenantt Roy Siegle (left) and his R/O Lieutenant Bob Orzell pose by their P-61 at the squadron's base in France after D-Day. They were involved in a desperate zero-zero landing at an alternate base in Belgium in December 1944. They hit a metal fence that destroyed their Black Widow, resulting in a serious back injury for Lieutenant Siegle. (Roy Siegle)

Over the past few nights, we had shot down quite a few of their planes and they were well aware that we were up in significant numbers."

"It was toward the end of our patrol and we had just made the turn to head back to the west and our base at about 6,000 feet when Lt. Kopsel, my Radar Observer, noticed an aircraft down at 2,000 feet, flying in an easterly direction with its navigational lights on. This was unheard of and to out greater surprise, that aircraft was dropping flares! I peeled off behind him and dropped down to 1,500 feet and closed in quickly. My R/O, with the aid of his night binoculars, was able to get a positive identification and it was a Ju 188. At

R/O Flight Officer Chet Hawley (left) and pilot Lieutenant James Postlewaite pose by their P-61 named *Little Linda*. They were assigned to "B" Flight in the 422nd NFS. (John Anderson)

that time, the intruder was on a course of 0 degrees at 2,000 feet flying straight and level. The pilot was totally focused on what he was doing and didn't seem to be worried about anything or he would have been taking some mild evasive action. When I got to within 500 feet, he saw me and began to execute some sharp turns and he couldn't dive down and away because he was so low. Regardless, it was too late because I had him in my sights and fired. The 20mm rounds raked his fuselage and at the same time his dorsal turret gunner opened up on us."

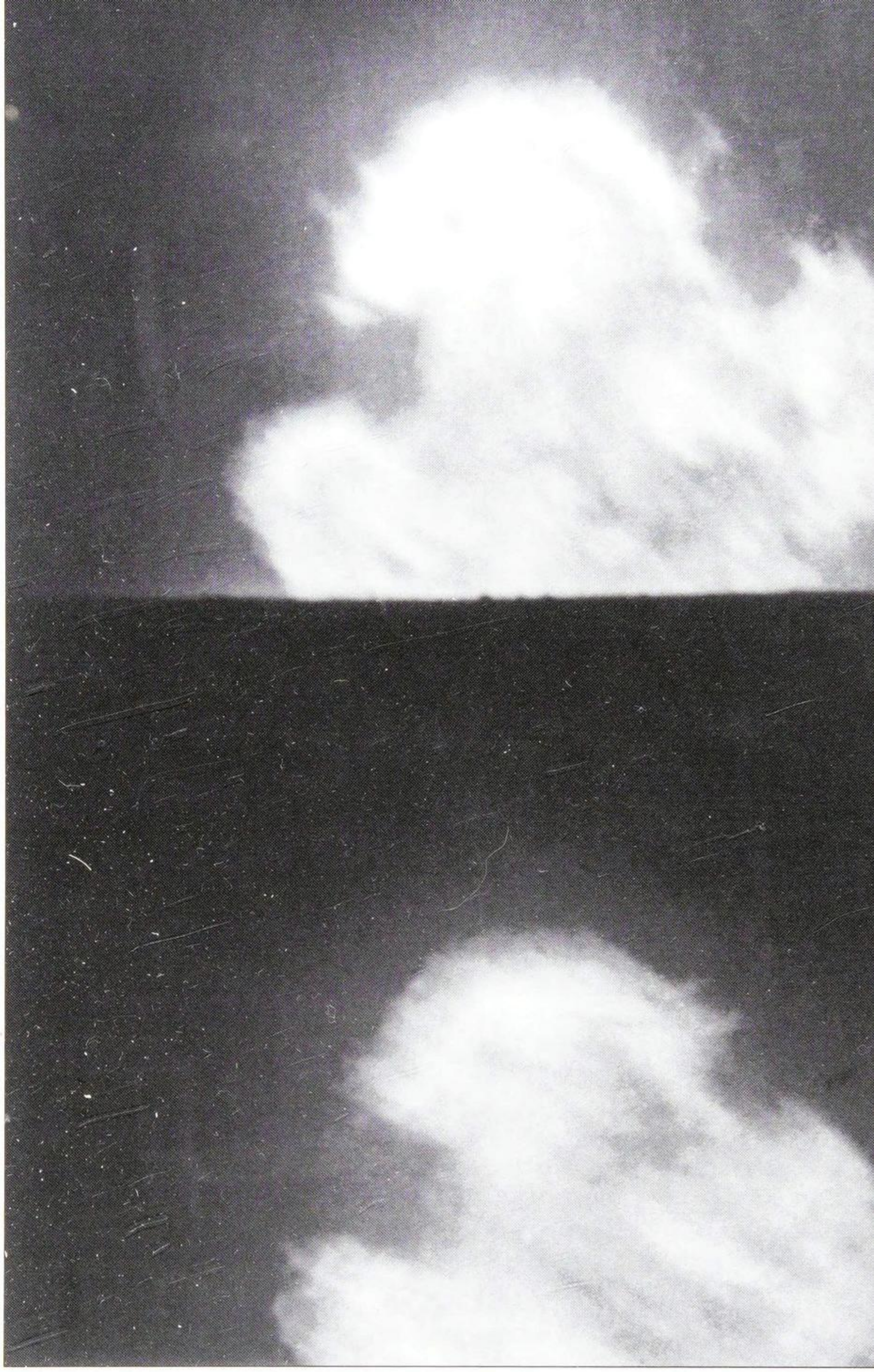
Lt. Ernst moved quickly off to the starboard side to avoid the Ju 188's fire and to keep from overshooting. He pulled back astern and slightly below which put him out of the gunner's vision. Three short bursts followed which impacted on both engines and a couple of seconds later one of the engines exploded, causing the aircraft to fall off to the left and straight into the ground. The encounter terminated at 0025 hours on the 27th. Ernst pulled up and headed back to base and a few minutes later, at 11,000 feet, he encountered heavy flak but quickly moved out of it and no damage was done. This was his third confirmed kill of a manned aircraft, so he still had two more kills left before he became an ace.

The high scoring 422nd Night Fighter Squadron had numerous pilots that were credited with spectacular kills, especially during the Battle of the Bulge. One of these was Lt. John W. Anderson who flew a Black Widow named *Tennessee Ridge Runner*. His assigned Radar Observer was Lt. James W. Mogan. They scored a probable and a kill on two successive nights (Christmas Eve and Christmas Day). Lt. Anderson clearly remembers both encounters. "We were operating from Florennes during this period and that put us in the middle of a lot of Luftwaffe night activity. Our mission on Christmas Eve 1944 was to patrol between the Meuse and the German border, which encompassed the break-through area. I guess we were about 30 minutes into the mission when GCI came on the radio and vectored us toward an unidentified aircraft. We got a lock-on from a distance of three miles and at that time I could see something moving in the distance with navigation lights on. We closed to 800 feet with the target at 12 o'clock and 50 degrees. There was no doubt that it was a Ju 88 flying on a course of 200 degrees and maintaining an altitude of 5,000 feet. The pilot evidently spotted us because he began taking hard evasive action. I stayed with him, got in close again and pulled my nose up slightly and gave him two bursts of 20mm from a distance of 500 feet with solid hits observed on the '88's right wing root."

"At that point, my guns jammed so I tried to drive him right into the ground as he tried everything he could to shake me. We had a running dogfight all the way down to 500 feet and all of a sudden my guns cleared and I opened up on him again. I got good strikes on his right engine which immediately started to smoke. I continued firing until my ammo was exhausted, but the Ju 88 would not explode even though a lot of debris was flying off of it and at this time, his navigation lights went out. They had helped me keep up with him during our running battle. I broke

off slightly as I had no guns and when last seen, he was at 1,500 feet and losing altitude in a lazy orbit. Although no explosion was seen, we were given a "probably destroyed" We completely broke off at 1955 hours. No parachutes were seen to open. There was no way he could have made it back to his base and unless the pilot found a smooth place to belly in, I feel that it was definitely a kill."

The following night (25 December) put the Anderson/Mogan crew up again on patrol. *Tennessee Ridge Runner* launched at about 2200 hours. There were multiple bogeys flying in and out of their area and GCI had them on several chases that never got close enough for a positive identification. Finally, at about 2245 hours, their luck started to change when they were directed toward an intruder 20 miles out, headed in a westerly direction (headed toward them). Lt. Anderson takes it from there. "Several vectors brought us in close enough for our AI radar to pick it up and at three miles out, we picked up the pursuit. The bogey was flying at about 4,500 feet with an indicated airspeed of 190 and he was gently weaving which indicated some type of mild evasive action. We got our visual at 2,500 feet but had to close to 800 in order to identify it as a Ju 188 and we were sure by the shape of the fuselage and the pointed wing tips. We were 30 degrees below him, so he had no idea we were behind him. I pulled up to the 12 o'clock position dead astern and opened fire at approximately 600 feet. My first burst of 20mm hit his right wing root causing the aircraft to initiate a gentle turn to the left. A second burst struck his right engine which immediately disintegrated throwing a sheet of oil back on my windscreen. However, we were so close to the target that I fired a longer third burst that converged all over his left wing outboard of the engine which caused another batch of debris to come back toward us. At this point, The Ju 188 fell off to the left on its back losing altitude quickly. Our speed cleared the windscreen enough that I could orbit the doomed aircraft as it went down and I saw it hit the ground and explode. This happened at 2300 hours and neither of us saw any parachutes. It was a clean confirmed kill for us. VII Corps troops on the ground reported that an aircraft had indeed crashed at that location, so there was no doubt about our victory over the Ju 188."



Gun camera film was almost useless in confirming a kill in the dark. This film shows the huge explosion of a Do 217 hit with 20mm rounds on the night of 21 March 1945 Captain Raymond Anderson of the 422nd NFS got credit for this victory and went on to finish his combat tour with three kills. (John Anderson)

Captain Raymond Anderson was only one of many sharpshooters in the 422nd Squadron. He finished his combat time with three confirmed kills. His interesting final victory occurred on the night of 21 March 1945. Flying on this patrol with Lt. Bolinder's R/O Lt. Robert Graham, Anderson's assignment was to patrol an area just west of the Rhine River which was protecting a segment of the American First Army. Anderson and Graham took off at 2250 hours and most of the patrol was uneventful except for some vectors to unidentified aircraft that never led to a positive identification. Just minutes past midnight, they got a call from GCI "Marmite" about a fast moving bogey headed their way coming from the Southeast at 8,500 feet. After several vectors from GCI, Lt. Graham was able to pick it up on his radar scope. It was about a mile and a half out and already taking violent evasive maneuvers in the form of 180-degree turns,

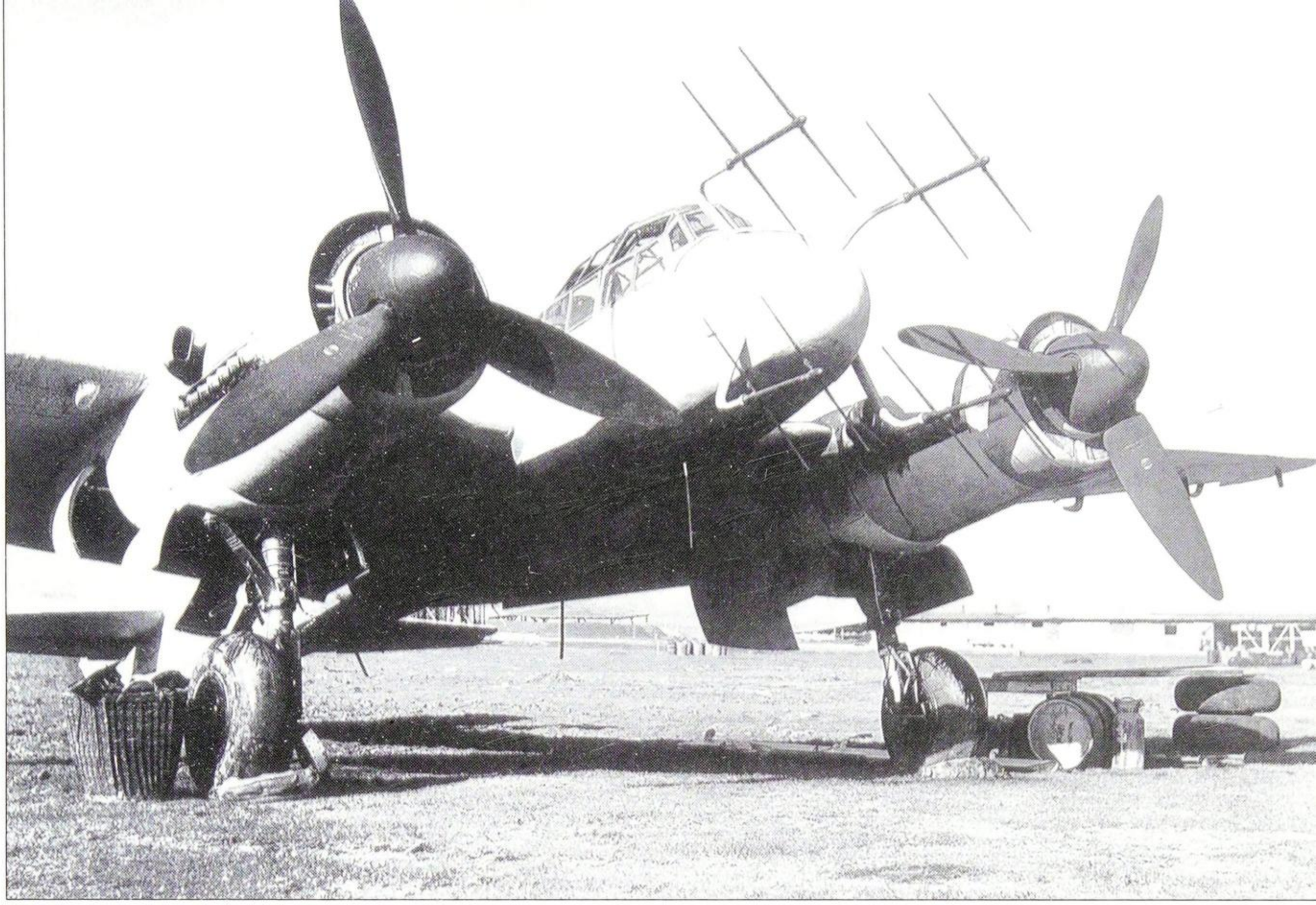
The workload placed on the 425th Squadron was extremely heavy because it had to protect the rapidly advancing Patton's Army during the hours of darkness. These maintenance personnel prepair their Black Widow for more night patrols on 27 September 1944 when the 425th was based at Coulommiers, France. (USAF)

sudden dives followed by steep climbs. AI was lost several times due to this, but with the help from "Marmite," they stayed close. When contact was reestablished, the aircraft was still taking evasive action and it was obvious that the German crew knew that there would be P-61s on patrol in the area into which they were flying.

Captain Anderson closed to 1,200 feet where he got a distant visual that showed twin exhausts and two vertical stabilizers at an altitude of 3,500 feet at 140 mph. Anderson had to open up his cowl flaps to slow down to maintain a certain distance behind as he slowly closed the gap. Finally, at 300 feet distance and 30 degrees above the P-61, he was able to get a positive and identify it as a German Dornier 217 bomber with a pencil-shaped fuselage and a crew of four. The Luftwaffe widely used the Dornier 217 as a long-range reconnaissance aircraft, but its primary role was as a bomber that could carry up to 8,800 pounds of bombs.

For some reason, the enemy aircraft started flying straight and level and completely abandoned any evasive action. When the range centered at 400 feet, Captain Anderson fired one long burst of 20mm into the Do 217 and it immediately burst into flames with large pieces of debris coming back toward the Black Widow. Anderson made a sharp gut wrenching turn to the left to avoid the pieces of the German bomber as the burning mass passed slightly to his right. His R/O commented that as they passed the stricken bomber, one wing fell off and he observed only one parachute. The fight ended at 0045 hours and with the remainder of their patrol uneventful, they returned to base. Another 422nd pilot in the next sector observed a flaming aircraft go into the ground at a distance of 15 miles away. The time he stated in the debriefing coincided with Captain Anderson's kill.

Major Leon G. Lewis, C.O. of the 425th in reflecting back on the war stated that there were several things that stuck out in his mind about his squadron's combat stint. He said that the move across France into Germany cost his squadron six Black Widows and their air crews and that it would forever be on his mind. One tragedy that he feels even deeper about involved his Executive Officer (a non-flying type). This individual wanted to fly on a night mission and constantly requested it but each time Major Lewis turned him down. So, one night, he snuck into a P-61 that was due to fly that night. It was one that had had the top turret removed which left a small space behind the gunner that was up in a nook hardly visible to the gunner. He remained there until the pilot and crew climbed in and took off. His presence was unknown to the crew and on that mission that Black Widow was shot down by heavy ground fire and everyone onboard was listed as KIA. On some of the 425th aircraft, Major Lewis had had the top turret removed to lighten the weight which it did and allowed the aircraft to quickly reach 25,000 to



The Germans built a very effective night fighter/bomber that was one of the most dangerous opponents for the P-61s. The Luftwaffe used it to go after the night-flying RAF bombers with limited success. The 422nd Night Fighter Squadron was credited with shooting down 10 of these Junker Ju 88s. There is an elaborate antennae network positioned in the aircraft's nose. (Hans Schmidt)

30,000 feet. This was also beneficial in that much of the squadron's tasking was low-level strafing and its four 20mm cannon provided more than enough firepower without the top .50 caliber guns.

Major Lewis often remembers VE Day in Europe which brought out just about every civilian in Paris. "General Patton came down to see us and he was very pleased with the job we had done in keeping night flying Germans away from his troops as they advanced deep into Germany. We were granted a "stand-down" for two days and a truck arrived about the same time, loaded with Champagne and booze. We enjoyed those two days immensely. I was lucky enough to fly into Orley Field in Paris for the VE Day festivities. It was a gathering on the Champs Elysees and the streets were jammed shoulder-to-shoulder with civilians. It was the wildest celebration I have ever witnessed!"

Battle Honors were awarded by 9th Air Force to the 422nd Night Fighter Squadron for its remarkable achievements on the night of 16-17 December and 27-28 December during the Battle of the Bulge. The award read:

"The 422nd Night Fighter Squadron: For outstanding performance of duty in action against the enemy in the Ardennes Salient on the nights of 16/17 and 27/28 December 1944. On each of these nights the 422nd exerted maximum effort in countering the enemy's attacking force and, despite extremely adverse weather conditions, succeeded in destroying five enemy aircraft on each night. In addition, and above their normal role of intercepting and destroying enemy aircraft, the 422nd attacked marshalling yards, road and rail networks, motor transport and locomotives on intruder missions, thereby effectively continuing the air effort to isolate the battlefield to cover a full twenty-four hours each day. The valiant efforts and unprecedented accomplishments of the 422nd on each of these occasions made a major contribution in denying the enemy his objectives and constituted an illustrious chapter in the history of the United States Army Air Forces."

Pilot 2nd Lieutenant Cletus Ormsby (left) and Radar Observer Flight Officer Davis Howerton, the flight crew of *Two O'clock Jump,* pose by their Black Widow prior to an early-evening mission out of a captured airfield in France. They were assigned to the 425th NFS. (Gene Jacobs)

Lieutenant Van Neiswender, a pilot in the 425th NFS, is assigned to *Daisy Mae,* shown here at Coulommiers, France, in the fall of 1944. (Van Neiswender)

This scene explains itself. The war in Europe had just ended and this worn out crew chief celebrates by taking off his shoes and taking a nap. The Black Widow in the background was assigned to the 422nd NFS. (USAF)

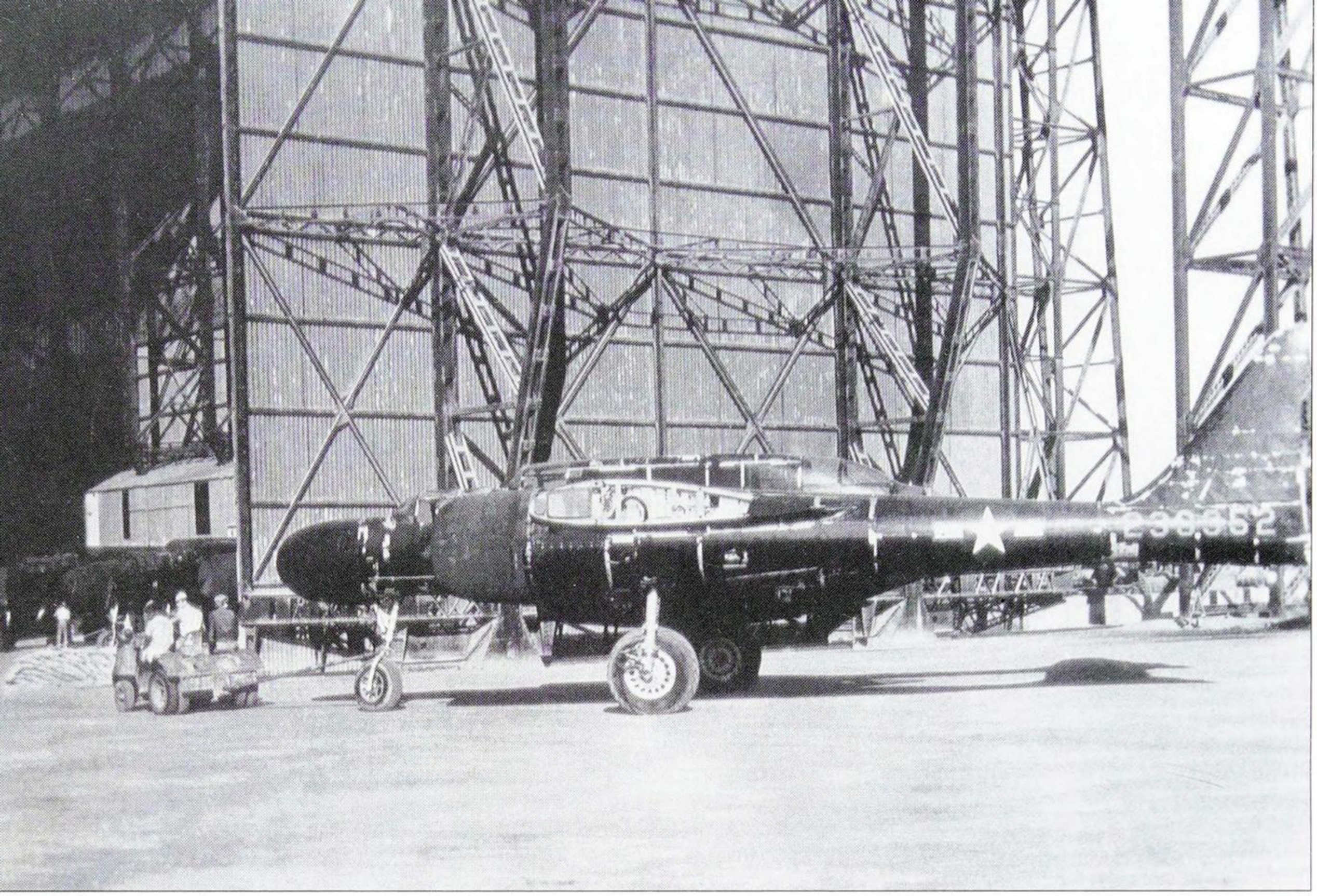
China-Burma-India Theater

Ground personnel for the 426th NFS work on a newly arrived P-61 at a base in India. They were ready to fly into China to begin combat operations against the Japanese. (Fred LeFever)

The European and Pacific Theaters were considered top priority for most all of the Allied military operations in World War II. They were the key to a decisive victory against the two leading Axis powers. China and its large land mass had become a stronghold for the Japanese during the late 1930s and for the first two years of the war. Engaging the Japanese there soon became a priority as the Asian Mainland represented a major stepping stone to Japan. When the B-29 Superfortresses became operational, the area suddenly moved way up the priority list. As the Allies sought to advance out of Burma and India and deeper into China, the extensive Japanese network of air bases and their ability to fly at night presented a serious challenge. The answer was to move two P-61 night fighter squadrons into the theater. The squadrons had to cover a massive geographical area but did an excellent job, despite being spread thin. China covered 3,691,000 square miles while adjacent Burma covered 261,790 square miles. As the Allies began to concentrate on China, Intelligence sources stated that there were well over one million Japanese troops in that country.

In December 1943, the Japanese controlled most of Burma and they were positioning themselves on the border with India to launch a major offensive into that country. To address this critical situation, the Supreme Allied Commander in the South East Asia Command, Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten, ordered the integration of all Allied air operations over Burma, forming what was known as the Eastern Air Command that would be commanded by Major General George Stratemeyer. It was in this situation that two P-61 night fighter squadrons were brought in to handle the urgent business during the hours of darkness. The number of Black Widows that would be available in Burma and China were only a fraction of the total fighter force, but that small number would leave a big impression on the enemy!

The two squadrons assigned to the China-Burma-India Theater (CBI) were the 426th and 427th. The 427th was the first to receive the Black Widow in mid-August 1944. Its initial orders were cut to fly combat in the Mediterranean Theater, working out of Pomigliano, Italy, in September 1944. This stemmed from the fact that the United States had asked the Soviet Union to allow American B-17s to land and refuel on Soviet soil after bombing the oil fields/refineries in Romania. These bombers would take off from England, bomb the targets and recover in the Soviet Union. A squadron of P-61s was needed to protect the B-17s from German night attacks while they were in the USSR. The request was promptly denied. This left the



Most of the Black Widows destined for the CBI were shipped directly from the United States to India. They were off-loaded from ships and assembled at a major Air Service Command base there. (Garry Pape)

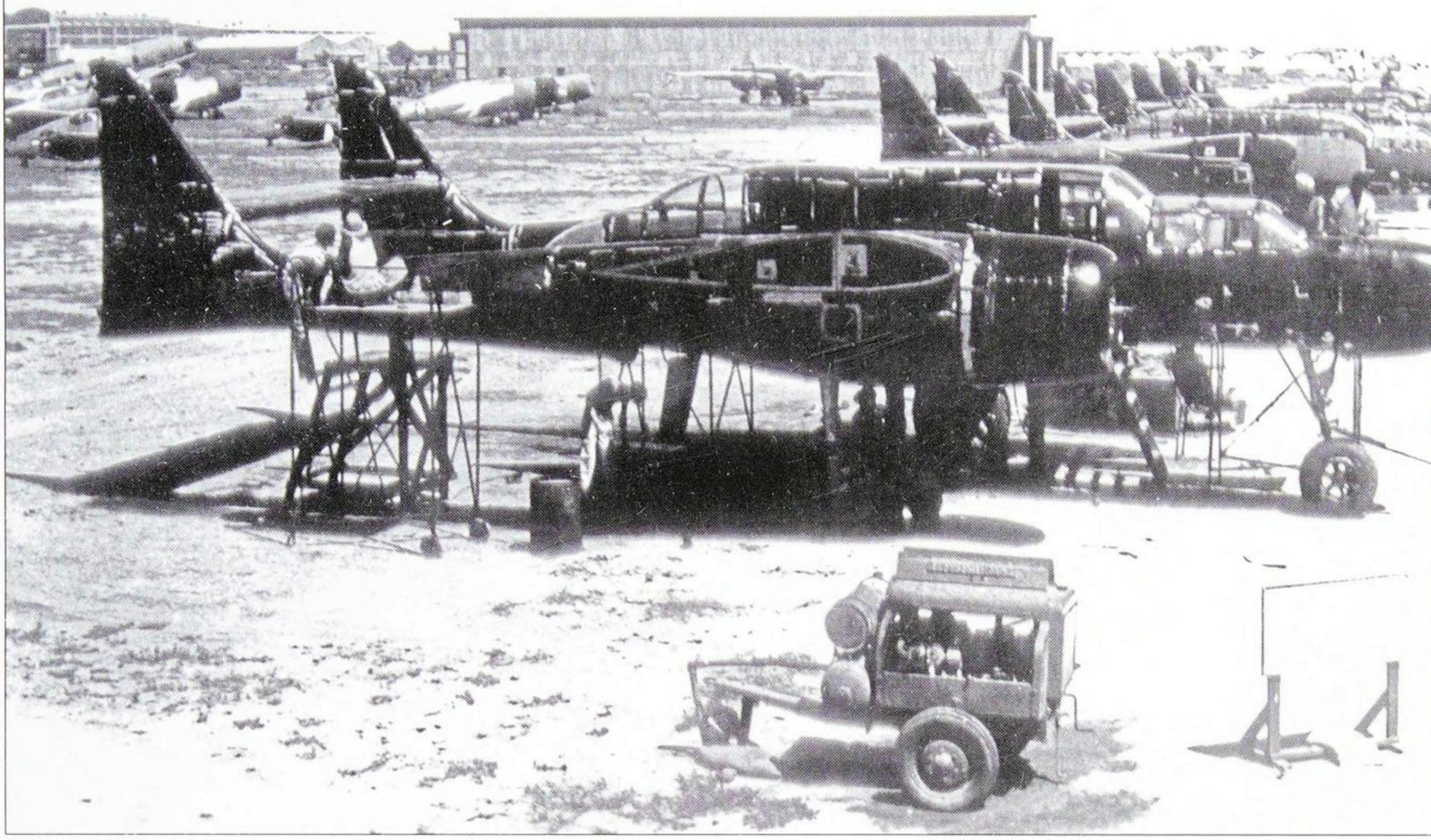
427th without its original tasking. It was just as well, since there were already four U.S. night fighter squadrons operating in the MTO, doing an excellent job, flying British Beaufighters and Mosquitos. German night flying activity had also dropped considerably, so there would not have been much action for the squadron and it was time to move on. Accordingly, on 20 September, orders came through for the 427th to move to the CBI Theater.

The orders sent the 427th to Barrackpore, India, a location that would be one of the major centers for assembling all types of newly arrived aircraft that had been shipped over by boat. Their sister squadron, the 426th, would report straight to Madhaiganj, India in early August while waiting for their new P-61s to be re-assembled as they came off the ships. They would begin to see action in early October 1944 when they flew their new aircraft into Chengdu, (Chengtu) China. Their first assignment was to provide a flight of Black Widows to patrol every night over the Chengdu airfield and provide protection for the B-29 Superfortresses.

But, first of all, the new P-61s had to undergo some quick modifications, including the addition of HF radios and radio compasses, that would delay their first combat mission until October 27th. This put the squadron about 30 days behind the schedule that General Claire Chennault had requested. The area experienced exceptionally heavy air traffic day and night, most of it consisting of transport flights bringing in fuel and ammunition. The Japanese quickly learned that Chengdu was the base that had to be neutralized and the effort they put into this was evident. Once the Black Widow patrols started, it only took two days for the 426th to draw first blood. On 29 October 1944, Captain Robert R. Scott encountered a lone Japanese "Lilly" bomber and shot it down, marking the first night-fighter kill in the CBI.

Just about every night found the squadron's aircraft chasing numerous bogeys all over that part of China. Most of the time, the aircraft never got close enough to fire. On the night of 21 November, Captain John J. Wilfong and his radar observer Lt. Glenn Ashley were out on a long patrol that would prove memorable. Captain Wilfong recalls: "After taking off, we came under the control of our ground radar operators. Well into the mission, we were vectored toward an intruder that was flying at 6,000 feet and lumbering along at a very slow airspeed. I closed on it at a very high speed and overshot him and promptly lost the bogey. Fortunately, our frustration was short lived as GCI found another one at the same altitude with a heading of 270 degrees. This time my closure was a lot slower and when we got within four miles of him, Lt. Ashley picked it up on his scope. Before we could close all the way, the enemy aircraft started taking evasive action and suddenly climbed up to 14,000 feet. This made it very easy to close and get a positive identification. It was a Mitsubishi Ki-46 "Dinah" (a twin engine Japanese bomber capable of speeds in excess of 350 m.p.h.)."

"I eased back on the throttle when we got about 600 feet behind him. At that time, we were 5 degrees below and 5 degrees to starboard of our target. I gave him a quick burst of 20mm (about 40 rounds) and the bomber exploded right in front of us. It was a textbook intercept and a quick, clean kill." The squadron would quickly find out that most all of the Japanese aircraft did not carry much armor and were very vulnerable to high-caliber rounds. On many of the Black Widows' kills in the Pacific regions, the enemy



All of the P-61s that were shipped to India served with either the 426th or 427th Night Fighter Squadrons. Major assembly areas like this one probably located in Barrackpore, India, re-assembled nearly every type of Allied aircraft coming into the China-Burma-India (CBI) Theater. (Garry Pape)

bombers disintegrated in a fire ball when the first burst hit them.

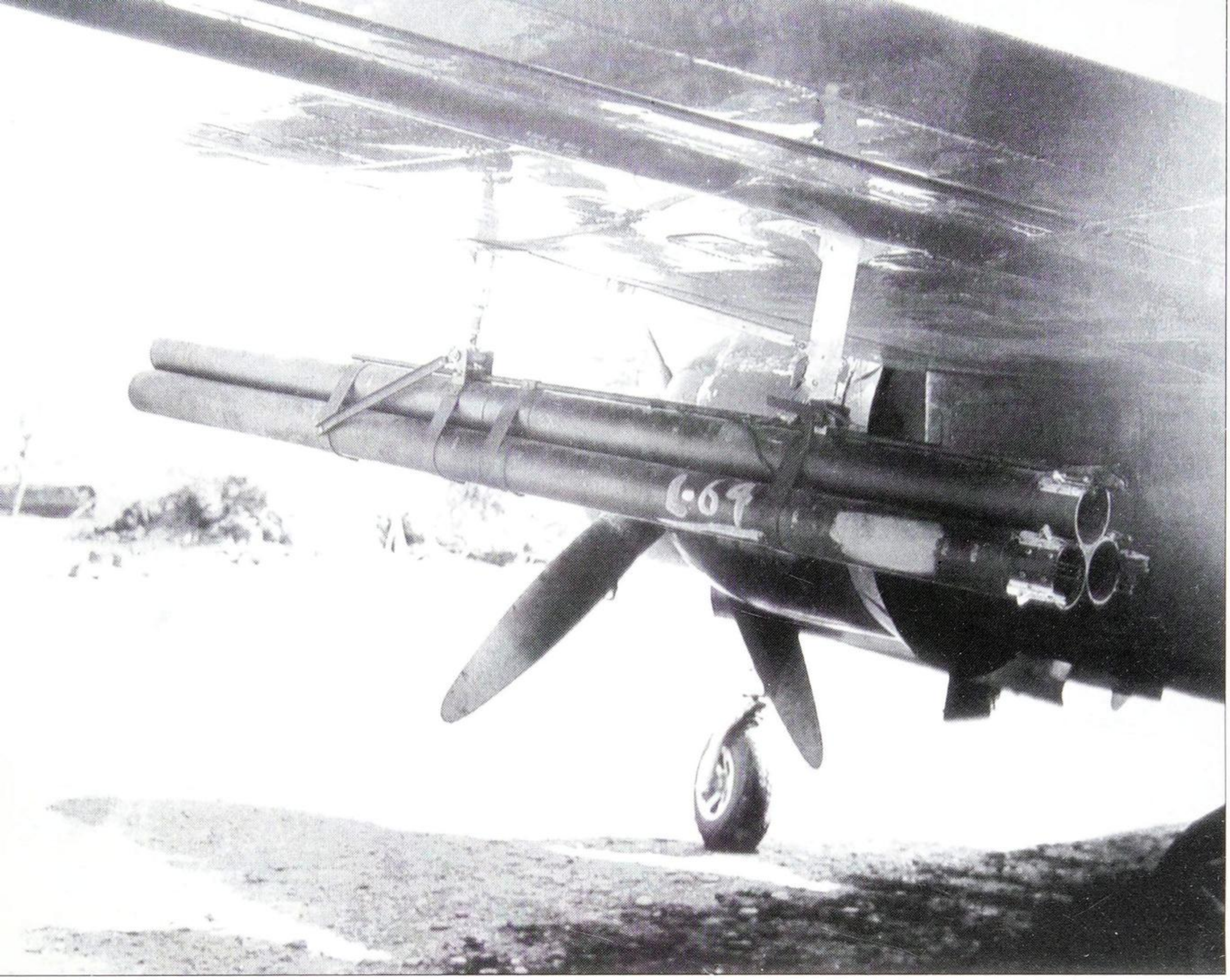
While the 426th would be the first night fighter squadron to see action in the CBI, the 427th was receiving new P-61s at the depot in India and would be immediately setting up operations at Myitkyina Air Base in Burma. There was only a slight delay in making this move as the HF and radio compasses had to be installed and the fabric tail surfaces had to be brush doped to give them more durability in the adverse weather conditions they would face in China and Burma. At the Northrop factory, they had been spray doped, but its effects did not last long out in the field.

Both squadrons had to face something worse than heavy combat; boredom brought about by too much dormant time. The 427th was in an area with practically no enemy air activity at night while the 426th had to fly great distances in order to have a shot at a Japanese aircraft. When they first set up operations, they had to become proficient while working with GCI and this led to long missions with no chance of intercepting an enemy plane. On top of that, the terrain was very rugged and it was dangerous to fly at low altitude. Relief was close at hand, however, when the 426th commanding Officer Major William C. Hellriegel took two P61s and three flight crews to a forward base deep into northern China. Xi'an (Hsian) was the last outpost in the Nationalist held section of northeast China. This move elevated the dwindling morale, as it gave the Black Widows a chance to score some kills.

Radar Observer 2nd Lieutenant James R. Smith remembers arriving in Xi'an. "The only thing we knew about this place was that there was supposed to be a P-51 outfit operating out of the strip. We arrived in the afternoon and attracted quite a crowd because no one on the base had even heard of a P-61 before, so it was a curiosity. Prior to landing, my pilot Captain Carl Absmeier asked the tower for permission to make a "tactical approach" and showed off a little with a low, fast approach down the runway, pulling up into a steep chandelle, dropping wheels and flaps while inverted at the top and then pulling the plane through the rest of the half-loop to a landing. The P-61, with its super large control surfaces, could make this maneuver spectacular!

"The commanding officer of the P-51 wing didn't like us and had heard some negative things about night fighters, so he asked us to leave. The problem was there wasn't enough gas at that base to let us leave, so we were stuck. He finally stated that if we could siphon enough gas from some of the damaged Mustangs to fly one night mission, he would o.k. it. We went down the P-51 flight line with 55-gallon drums and siphon hose. We were told not to empty their tanks completely, but leave some gas behind to prevent condensation. After fueling our P-61, named *Jing-Bow Joy-Ride,* we briefed for the night's trial mission and it would be against a major marshalling yard at Sin-siang which was approximately 300 miles from our base."

Heading into strange territory, they picked out the Yellow River Bridge on radar which was about 15 miles from the target. Dropping down to 1,000 feet and passing over their intended target, it was dark and quiet . . . nothing! They continued on, following the tracks for another 60 miles and still no enemy activity. Discouraged, they set a course back to base and a few minutes into that course, Captain



Rocket tubes are seen attached to a 427th Black Widow. Both of the CBI squadrons became very proficient in firing rockets against rail and road traffic in China and Burma. (Glenn Holcomb)

Absmeier stated he saw a moving train in a rugged area that was not supposed to have any tracks, but sure enough there it was. They set up for a firing pass and when they flew over the locomotive, it disappeared in the cloud of steam released by the 20mm rounds finding their mark. The next firing passes were against the boxcars and as they pulled up, the engine seemed to be leaning like it was going to fall over. Satisfied that they had done some damage, they set a course for the base. There had been no explosions as a result of the strafing. In the meantime, a tanker with gas had arrived at the base and the Mustangs were gassed up and ready to check out the damaged train. Sure enough, they confirmed that one locomotive and several boxcars had been destroyed. The wing commander was very pleased with their mission and it looked like they had found a new home.

The 427th squadron was still not getting any action because of its location. To make matters worse, while they were still in India, the gasoline shortage was so great in China and Burma that the squadron's pilots were checked out in the P-47 just in case they couldn't get fuel for their twin engine fighters, they still might be able to fly combat in the single engine Thunderbolt. Fortunately, this situation eventually eased somewhat and the 427th was allowed to keep its Black Widows. Soon afterwards, they were flying some night intruder missions against Japanese positions and rolling stock. On Christmas Day 1944, they sent in a detachment to Kunming, China to relieve a detachment from the 426th squadron. Two weeks prior to this move, the 427th officially came under the control of 10th Air Force, while the 426th remained with 14th Air Force. During this brief period under new management, the 427th would fly 17 night missions to intercept unidentified aircraft. Twelve of these were friendly aircraft that had malfunctioning IFF and two were enemy aircraft that scattered out before the P-61s could get close enough to fire.

Although the Black Widows had not been able to put a significant dent in Japanese night operations, the enemy was well aware of their presence. In one of the strangest episodes involving Japanese Intelligence, one of the 426th aircraft was sitting alert when ordered to scramble. The pilot began taxiing out and the landing gear lock was accidentally released, causing the port gear to collapse, throwing a prop and bending the left tail boom. The following day, Tokyo Rose broadcast "We know that the night fighter pilot pulled his gear on his airplane last night. Now they are down to only two night fighters on the North Strip." They never found out who relayed this information, but they surely had spies embedded in the air field support unit or in the laborers that maintained the runway. On top of this, the weather conditions in the Chengdu and Xi'an areas were very poor. This was almost a constant overcast, varying in

Two 426th Black Widows work on a daytime road sweep in China. When nighttime Japanese air traffic dwindled, P-61 squadrons began flying during the day in search of road targets. (Joseph Greenbaum)

thickness from 500 feet to 5,000 feet with icing conditions nearly always present throughout the overcast. Ceilings often were as low as 500 feet. The elevation of the area extended from 1,500 feet all the way to 18,000 feet. Also, due to the shortage of gasoline, much needed training flights were almost non-existent.

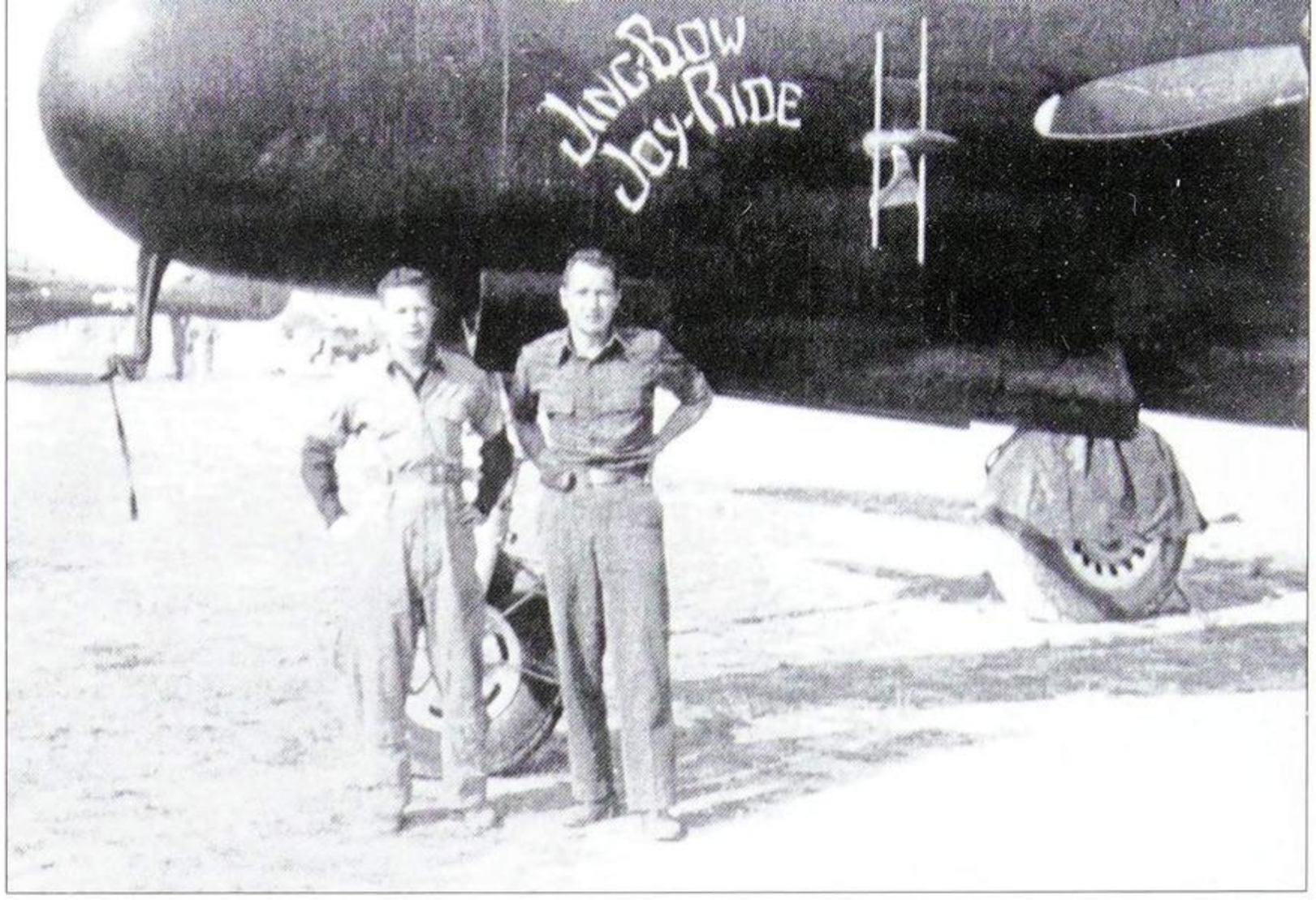
Lt. Glen Jackson was another of the combat-seasoned pilots from the 426th who flew missions all over China before war's end. His permanent Radar Observer during his combat stint was Lt. Frank Moran. Some of his most memorable missions were flown out of a forward base at Ankang. "This small base was about 400 miles northeast of Chengdu and located in a narrow valley surrounded by mountainous terrain. To say it was dangerous for night takeoffs and landings would be an understatement. Because of the dangers, the transport pilots refused to fly in and out during bad weather or after dark. The landing area was only 3,500 feet in a flat rough cow pasture. Our missions out of Ankang were mostly strafing and bombing against anything moving in the valley beyond the 10,000 foot mountain range just east of the field.

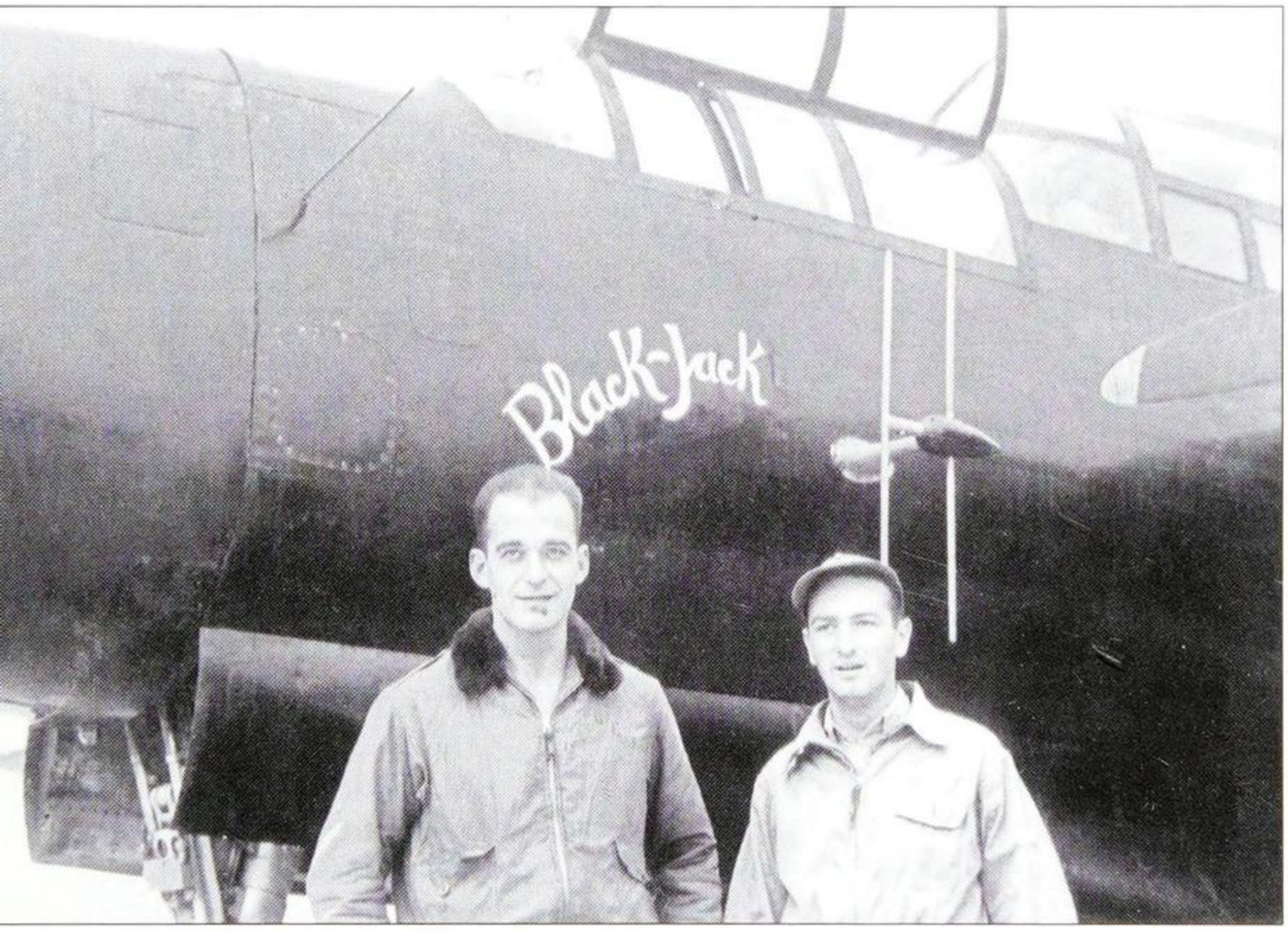
"The targets most encountered were bridges, truck convoys, trains and troop bivouac areas which were located by the small charcoal fires. We had never seen this area in the daytime, but it didn't take long to realize parts of this valley contained pretty good sized hills. Our favorite external load was a combination of napalm bombs plus para-frag cluster (anti-personnel) bombs. Our 20mm rounds were mostly the high-explosive type and our P-61s were not equipped with the top .50-caliber turret. When a convoy of trucks was sighted, the ideal situation was to strafe and disable the lead vehicle, thereby jamming the whole column up and blocking the road. Because they were usually traveling in a partially blacked-out condition, a good pass usually caused a lot of rear end collisions. We usually started out with a couple of passes with our 20mm and then followed it with the anti-personnel clusters.

"When we stumbled on a bivouac area with troops, the best weapon for that was our napalm. Since we had to fly low when delivering it, we were vulnerable to small arms fire. Usually, the troops would camp in some ravines that proved to be extremely dangerous to get into for us. Sometimes, our napalm would light up the surrounding area where we could see just how dangerous our flight path had been. Some times the Japanese troops would fire mortars, with timed fuses, vertically as we passed overhead."

Captain Robert Scott recalls a mission flown on 19 January 1945 that proved to be a classic example of how the hunter could easily become the hunted. "We took off from Laohekou (Laohokow) for a night mission over the Hankou (Hankow) area which was located on the Han River. This was about 400 miles inland from the coast. When we arrived over the city, it was lit up with searchlights so our arrival certainly wasn't considered a surprise! I came in low at an altitude of about 500 feet to stay under the searchlights. We crossed the city and began flying up the Han River at about 50 feet and the only obstacles we had to go up and over were bridges. Periodically, there were searchlights on both sides of the river, but they were tracking above us, so they had no idea we were as low as we were. We approached our target which was the main enemy airfield in that area and I noted that the searchlights were pointing straight up which indicated there may be aircraft landing or taking off. We moved a few miles north and then turned around to make another

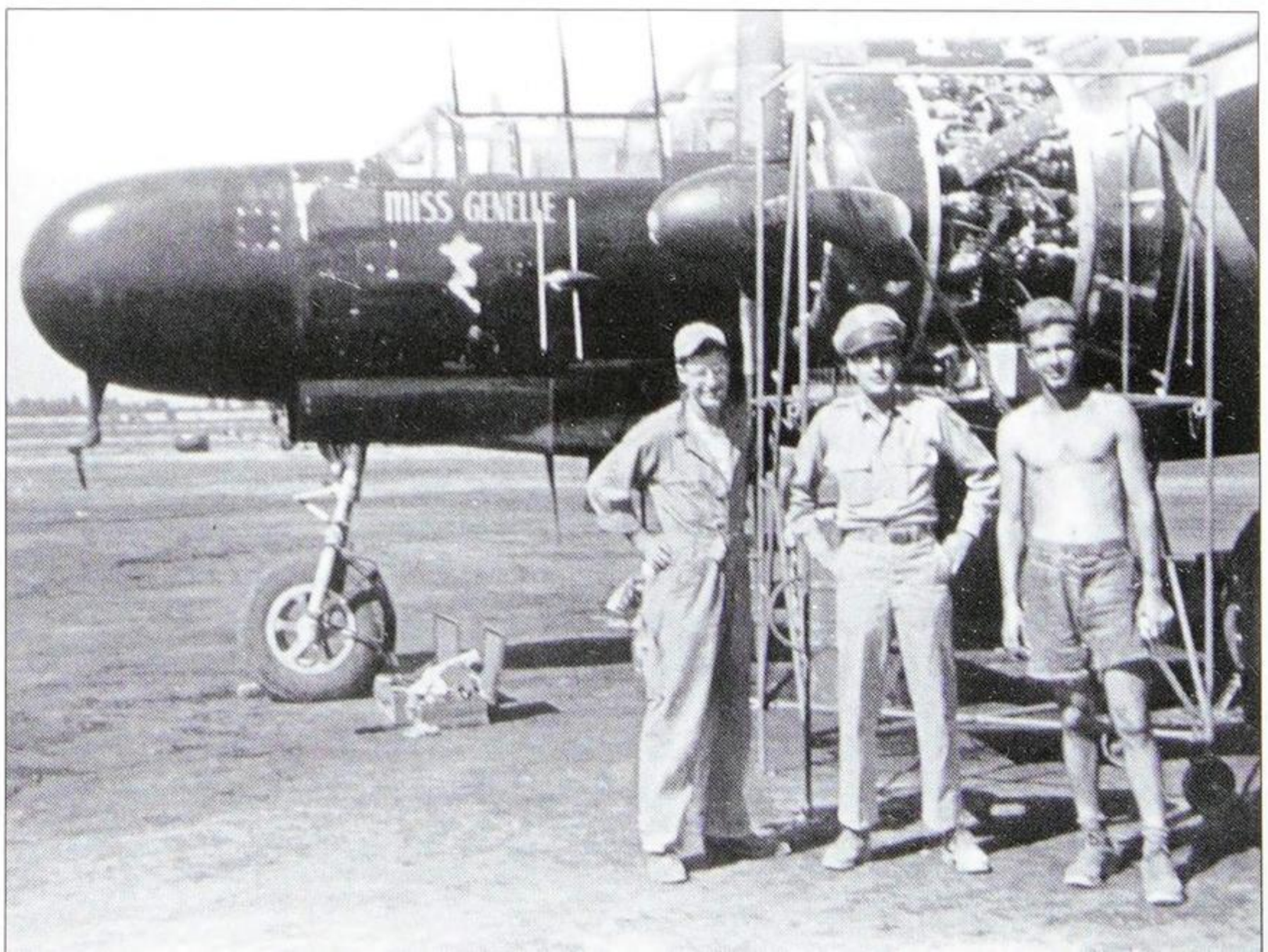
Captain Carl Absmeier (right) and his R/O Lieutenant James Smith pose by their *Jing-Bow Joy-Ride* at their base in Chengdu (formerly spelled "Chengtu"), China. They were the top night killers for the 426th Night Fighter Squadron with two confirmed. *"Jĭng bào"* in Chinese means "air raid siren." There were two night fighter squadrons that covered the China-Burma-India Theater. The 426th was the first to fly combat over the vast expanses of China. It had to spread out into numerous small detachments to cope with the task of air defense at several airfields, all of which were subject to night attacks from Japanese bombers. The 426th NFS, the only Black Widow squadron that chalked up any kills, finished the war with five. (Carl Absmeier)





First Lieutenant Glen Jackson (left) and his radar observer First Lieutenant Frank Moran named their aircraft *Black Jack.* They flew it on most of their missions with the 426th in China. Later in the war, when the Japanese were pulling back in China, the number of enemy aircraft up at night had dropped considerably. At that time, the 426th began long night intruder missions loaded with bombs and rockets. They would follow the railroad tracks or small rivers until they spotted a potential target. With two external fuel tanks, the range of the Black Widow could be stretched out to a 600 mile radius with some fuel to spare. This greatly expanded range allowed the P-61s to hit targets far behind enemy lines where the Japanese occupation forces felt safe and where many of their valuable assets lacked anti-aircraft protection. (Frank Moran)

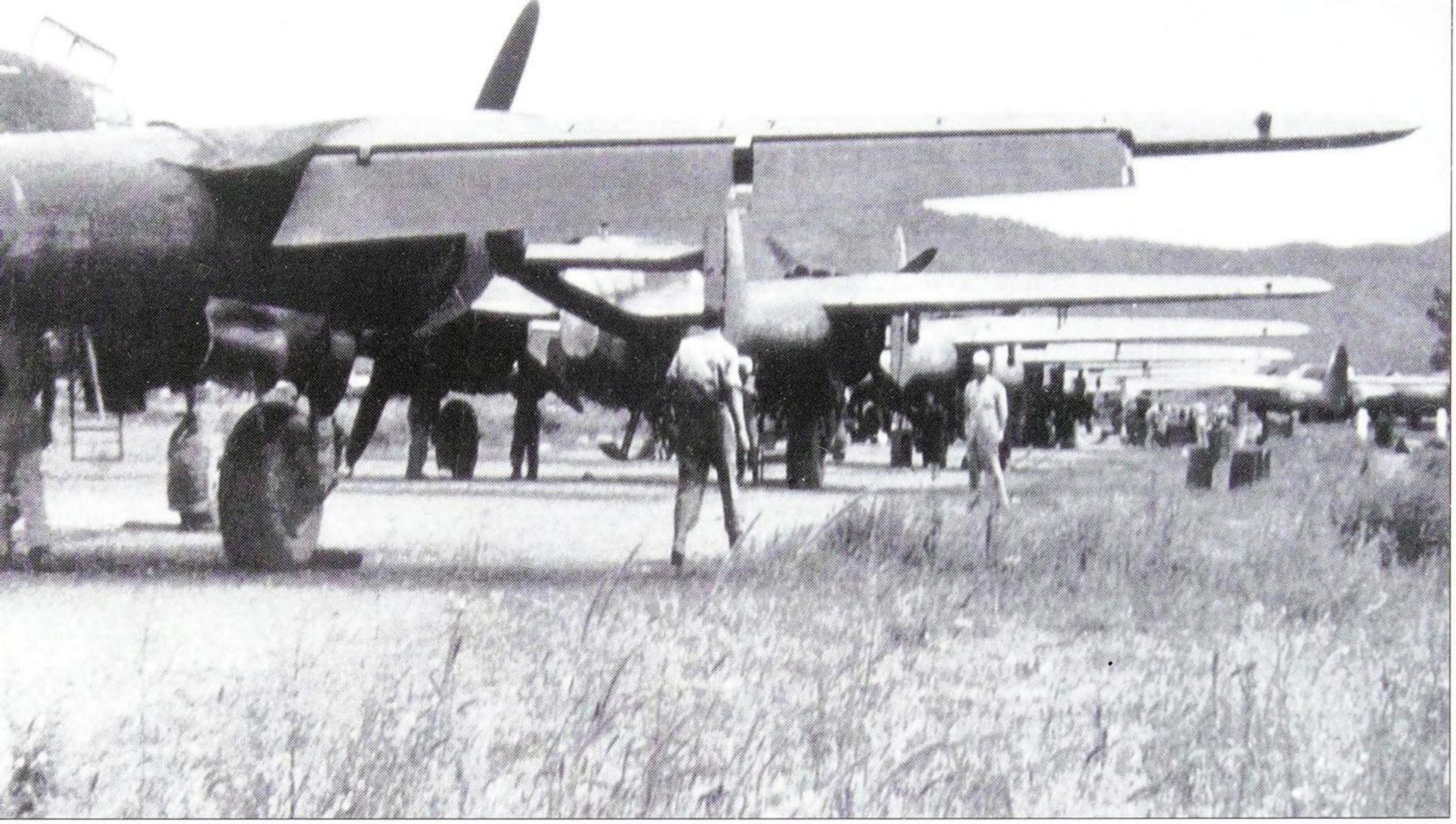
The pilot of *Miss Genelle* poses with his ground crew who were performing minor maintenance on the port engine. This was in preparation for the next night's mission out of a forward base used by the 427th NFS in China. The 427th Night Fighter Squadron was originally slated for duty in the Mediterranean Theater, but was diverted to India where it set up operations. As of 23 December 1944 the squadron moved into Myitkyina, Burma (now Myanmar), from where it sent out detachments into China. The squadron was never in a position to encounter many Japanese aircraft, but it did outstanding air-to-ground work with its rockets. The 427th had received its first P-61 in mid-August 1944 and at war's end, it had no confirmed kills. (Fred Blanton)



These 426th Squadron air crews pose by one of their Black Widows at a forward base near Chengdu, China, in late 1944. On the far left is Lieutenant Lorne "Duke" Reynolds. The 426th received its first P-61 on 25 September 1944 and although the squadron's men and aircraft formed up at Madhaiganj, India, all of their combat was in China. In contrast, their sister squadron, the 427th, flew some missions in Burma before moving east into China. When the 426th got its new P-61s, there was a slight delay as they had to be equipped with radio compasses which had become a major safety issue. But by 5 October 1944, four of the aircraft had been modified and were ready for combat. (Lorne Reynolds)

Second from the left is one of the "Godfathers" of the U.S. night fighter program, Colonel Winston Kratz, who is seen here visiting the 426th at Chengdu, China, in the fall of 1944. Sitting the jeep is the squadron commander Major W. C. Hellriegel. Major Hellriegel was the 426th's only commanding officer during World War II. He was there when the squadron activated on New Year's Day 1944 and he was still in charge when the squadron deactivated on 5 November 1945. Many Black Widows carried out some postwar duties in Japan and on Okinawa, but both CBI squadrons gave up their aircraft soon after the war ended. They were credited with their first aerial kill on the night of 29 October 1944. The 426th was under the control of 14th Air Force and General Claire Chennault during their operations in China. They were also a vital asset in protecting the B-29s that were based in the Chengdu area during that period. (Lorne Reynolds)

Air crews from the 426th Squadron managed to construct an excellent Officer's Club at Madhaiganj, India. The name given to the club was "Sloppy Joes." The squadron emblem hangs on the wall above the bar. The facilities and comforts in India were far better than those they would experience in China. These squadron members were waiting for the green light to take their Black Widows into the forward airfields in China. On 25 October 1944, the orders were cut and Major Hellriegel led five P-61s over the Hump to a base in China. This move coincided with a flight of five C-46 cargo planes, loaded with personnel and equipment, that made the same flight to get their combat operations set up. This group of P-61s continued on to the Chengdu area to be closer to the B-29s. (Howard Anglin)



These Black Widows are all assigned to the 427th NFS. On rare occasions, some of the forward bases in Burma became crowded with P-61s. Most of the time small detachments of Black Widows were strung out in several small air strips. (Glenn Holcomb)

pass over the field. We saw a lot of unoccupied revetments but no good targets were in sight.

"We moved on over to another area that had a satellite airfield that had several aircraft parked in protected spaces, but I noticed our fuel gauge and we barely had enough to return to base, so that is where we headed. As we got within 50 miles of the base, GCI came on the radio and said we were being followed about 10 miles behind and off to our starboard. I turned off my IFF and the other aircraft seemed to have lost contact. When I turned it back on, they appeared to make contact again. This seemed to indicate that the enemy was homing in on the IFF signal, so I kept it off. This had been a four-hour mission with no positive results and it could have been disastrous if GCI hadn't alerted me as we could have been shot down while in the landing pattern of our own base."

Most of the pilots still remember at least one or more missions they flew. Lt. Jackson can recall two good ones, both of which were flown in his Black Widow named *Black Jack.* "The first one had a primary target of some gasoline storage tanks near Hankou on the banks of the Yangtze River. Because of the long-range mission, we carried external fuel tanks on the exterior racks. The plan was to ignite the storage tanks with our explosive 20mm shells. When we got in that area, the city was blacked out and the smoke from the wood-burning fires was hanging thick over the entire city. Regardless, we let down and located the river and turned to follow it upstream. That is when a major problem cropped up. The visibility was so bad, we would have had to be at a very close range to fire and that would have created a violent explosion that we would have had to fly through. Using my better judgment, we passed on the storage tanks and continued up the river. In a few minutes we spotted a walled in compound that was well lit. The main building was in the center and our first pass blew the doors out. I made several firing passes raking everything within the wall. I did notice the tell-tale flashes from automatic weapons around the perimeter. With our ammo spent, we headed back to base over a beautiful white cloud layer as the first rays of light began to appear in the east. Much to our surprise, during the debriefing, we found out we had hit the VIP Geisha House for the Hankou area. Lt. Moran and I wanted to paint a window with a red light on the side of our Black Widow, but the C.O. would not go for it."

Lt. Jackson's other mission involved a major offensive by the Japanese in an area from which the Chinese Nationalist troops had withdrawn. The airfield at Laozhou (Laochow) had been evacuated by the 426th and everything usable that was left behind had been destroyed. At this time, the P-61 detachment at the forward base was down to only two aircraft; *Black Jack* and *Harlot from Charlotte.* They both launched at first light in search of the advancing Japanese forces. This would be the first hunting mission they had flown in the daylight. Jackson recalls that mission. "Over the mountains and into the valley, we dropped down and started patrolling the roads. I flew on one side of the road and Captain Ira Elrod took the other side. When we were on the far side of the valley, we passed over a Jap Army base at about 500 feet and noticed some activity. At that time, I heard a couple of "pings" and realized that we had been hit with small arms fire. A few minutes later, I flipped the fuel gauge to main tanks and found that the left tank was full but the right one showed half full. We were rapidly losing fuel from the right tank.

"That worried me for a couple of seconds when Elrod pulled up and sharply to port and then dropped his nose and started firing. My concern with the fuel gauges caused me not to notice a column of enemy troops about four abreast and some four miles long! It was a major troop movement, so I positioned myself so that I started my run as Elrod was finishing his and so it went until all of our ammo was expended. The terrain was flat here, so the troops had no where to hide, so they fell prone and fired their rifles into our flight path. A portion of the road was lined by poplar trees which were about a foot in diameter. Our 20mm rounds cut off those trees

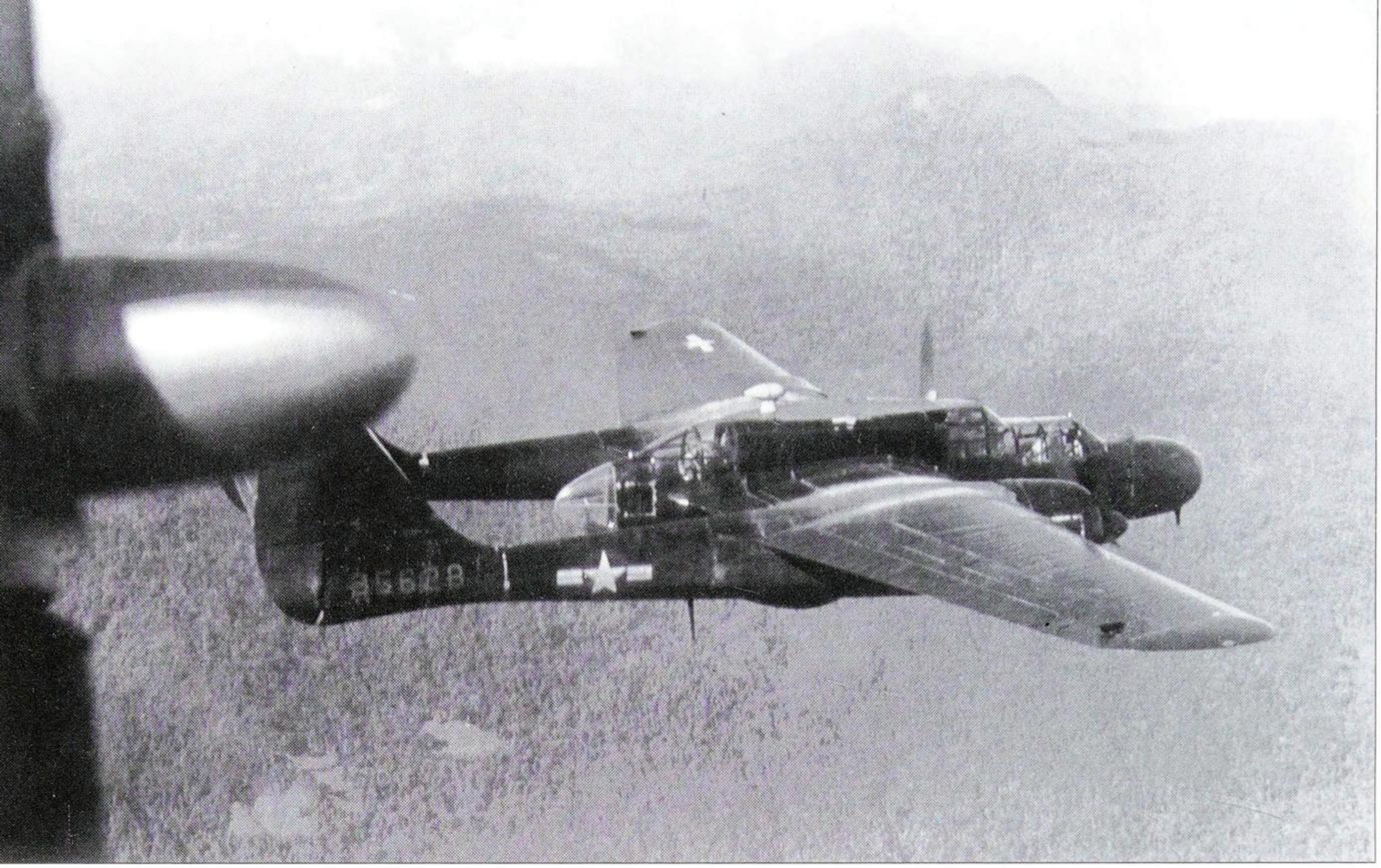
The 426th operated from relatively crude forward bases, such as this one at Xi'an, China. But like the 427th squadron, it excelled in good maintenance and maintained a high in-service rate. (Lewis Ober)

like tall grass before a sickle as we walked the rudders from side to side. A non-flying officer in the squadron was flying with us and he was crouched down behind my seat. He was almost standing up behind me trying to get a better view at what we were strafing and I kept reminding him to stay down because he wouldn't have the protection of the armored glass in front of us. It already had two nicks in it from direct hits."

When both P-61s ran out of ammo and started back to base, Lt. Jackson wasn't too worried about his nearly-empty right tank, because he could cross feed from the left one. But at that point the situation began to deteriorate. He found out that the cross feed was too damaged to function. His radio had been knocked out and he was just minutes from his right engine quitting. They had taken numerous hits from rifle fire on their strafing passes. As Jackson moved in front of Elrod, his right engine quit and at the same time as he feathered the prop, the right main landing gear door fell open and a long stream of black gas mixed with oil poured from the wheel well. The hydraulic system had also been shot out.

"Captain Elrod came in close and through sign language, he understood that I wanted him to lead us back to friendly territory where we could safely bail out or find some sort of strip to try to land on. Luckily, Elrod's R/O was familiar with the area and he led us to a little gravel strip on the river near one of our forward control bases. By this time, we had been on one engine for about an hour and the oil and cylinder head temperatures were near the redline. Without the hydraulic system there was no way to open the cowl flaps to cool the engine. Elrod made a low pass over the strip to make sure I had it in sight. Being young and somewhat foolish, I decided I was going to land gear down on that little strip. That sort of irrational thinking very nearly ended the lives of three people that day.

"On final approach, I lowered ¼ landing flaps with what pressure there was in the hydraulic accumulator and pulled the long emergency cable to release the main gear up-locks and the gear came down about half a mile off the runway, Elrod's R/O told me that my gear had not locked down. Instead of bellying in on the gravel, which was the sensible thing to do, I added power and attempted a go-around. The main gear had by this time locked down the aircraft staggered away down the valley leaving the strip behind. The engine was very hot and was starting to blow. There was no hope of gaining enough altitude to bail out and we were flying toward Jap territory. I got away with a 180-degree turn and could see that we were about 10 feet below the top of the sheer bank of the river which crossed the valley ahead of us. I pulled up as much as I dared and as we cleared the bank, my right wing struck a small tree and we stalled and made a soft touchdown. We passed through a garden sized patch of corn and then through a Chinese cemetery with mounds built up about five feet high. At that point, the left main gear sheared off and the nose section struck a terraced area and we came to a jarring halt. The weight of the officer riding right behind my seat tore my seat from the floor and threw me forward against the control column while at the same time, the nose section and cockpit floor folded up in front of me, forcing my knees up in front of me saving me from very serious injury. My R/O suffered numerous cuts on his face when he was thrown up against the radar control boxes and I suffered a broken left wrist. Some forward controllers found us and helped patch us up and a few days later, we were picked up and return to



A pair of 427th Black Widows fly over a mountain range in Burma on their way to strike a rail junction close to the Chinese border. The squadron did not receive its first P-61 until mid-August 1944. (Thomas N. Wilson)

our base at Chengdu. What an experience!"

In the meantime, the 427th squadron was working a heavy schedule on night intruder missions with great success. In mid-February 1945, the squadron commanding officer Lt. Col. James S. Michael flew back from Kunming with his armament officer Lt. Sam Gilkey, to supervise the installation of rocket launchers on the squadron's Black Widows and this would add another dimension to their attack potential against ground targets. Now, the 427th would be able to carry 500-pound GP bombs, napalm, two rocket hangers that held 4.5-inch high-velocity rockets, and a full load of 20mm ammo. Their most lucrative hunting ground was in central Burma. During one four-night period, one P-61 alone flew seven sorties, during which it dropped 2,000 pounds of bombs, fired 26 rockets and expended 1,825 rounds of 20mm. This activity was all against ground targets in enemy-held territory. In addition to this, they were vectored in on 22 "bogeys," all of which proved to be friendly aircraft without properly workingr IFF. A few days after this surge, the 427th was ordered to send two of its P-61s to a forward base at Zhijiang (Chihkiang) which was only about 100 miles from Japanese lines.

Weather conditions in early 1945 were tough in both Burma and China and the 427th seemed to be getting the brunt of the worst conditions. It was very dry in Burma and the enemy was setting grass and fields on fire to create a heavy cloud layer that prevented accurate bombing and strafing. In China, the flying weather was terrible due to natural causes (rain and fog). Night interdiction missions were trimmed back because of the hazards. The number of day missions was increased, but the smoke prevented the P-61s from getting down low enough to be effective in their strafing runs and firing their rockets. They did find some relief deeper in China and, with P-51 Mustang escorts, they went after enemy road and rail traffic which was increasing, due to the Japanese starting to pull back. The squadron was very effective while working up and down the Hankou-Guangzhou (Hankow-Canton) railroad corridor. One of its P-61s, fitted with external fuel tanks, ranged all the way down into northern Indochina to attack heavy Japanese troop concentrations. Missions that covered such extremely long distances such as this one were very rare for either squadron, however.

The top night fighter sharpshooter in the aerial arena for the CBI was Captain Carl J. Absmeier and his assigned Radar Observer 2nd Lt. James R. Smith. They finished the war with two confirmed kills in their P-61A named *Jing-Bow Joy Ride*. They had been told orally that the Chinese for air-raid was "Jing Bow" or something similar, hence the name for their Black Widow. ("Jing bao," as the words are spelled in Pinyin transliteration, actually means "air raid siren.") He relates the details of a successful mission. "We were flying out of Laohekou (Laohokow) (north of Hankou in east central China). We were on a routine night patrol where there had only been sporadic enemy activity flying after dark. We were still over friendly territory in hopes of catching a Japanese bomber trying to get in and out quickly with his bomb load. Suddenly, we got vectored onto an incoming bogey that was already close to us. Smitty locked on to him and we closed to about 400 feet in trail. At this distance, we easily got a positive and it was a "Lilly" bomber. I didn't consider myself a good marksman, so I eased on closer until we were about 100 feet behind and slightly low. They didn't have a clue that we were that close as they were in the middle of their bomb run and that was where their focus was. At this point, he had not dropped and I was not excited about pulling my nose up and firing my 20mm into his bomb bay!"

"Instead I moved over just a bit and put the pipper on his port engine nacelle and fired about 50 rounds of mixed explosive, incendiary, and armor piercing. In an instant, the engine blew up followed immediately by the aircraft itself. Before my reflexes could kick in, we were drenched with the oil and gasoline from the engine along with various pieces of the Lilly. We were completely blinded in forward vision and were also unable to shoot at other contacts we had on the mission and on top of that, we had a dandy time trying to land on the short grass strip we were based on. When we got back to base; we had to dig pieces of flying suits and other items out of both cowls. If I had been asked about any changes I would suggest in the P-61, it would have been to install a windshield wiper and a better system of instrument lighting. In mentioning the windscreen, one other mission that comes to mind; we were flying a mission in northern China on a sweep of the Japanese-held rail lines running from the Yellow River to Beiping (Beijing/Peking). We let down over enemy territory and ran into a huge swarm of insects at about 50 feet off the deck. It was like we hit a thick cloud that stuck with us. We continued on, but it was extremely difficult to strafe locomotives or any other target on the ground when you are looking through a clouded windscreen. A good wiper arrangement would have been welcome. None of this was meant as a criticism of the P-61 because it was a fantastic airplane that was very forgiving and had wonderful handling at the very slow speeds."

On 16 March 1945, the 10th Air Force gave the 427th orders to begin flying both day and night offensive reconnaissance missions. They were to focus their efforts on the road networks in Burma around Hopang, Namsang and Pangkeytu. The 426th was working similar tactics and also extracting a heavy toll on Japanese rolling stock, especially at night. Day missions were flown but the hunting proved to be sparse because the P-47 and P-51 day fighters nailed anything that moved and forced the enemy to limit most of their activity to the hours of darkness. Records of the 426th show that in one month in the spring of 1945, the squadron destroyed 60 trucks and damaged another 20 (the damaged vehicles were obliterated at first light by fighter-bombers). The number of enemy personnel killed or wounded was very high, but no specific numbers were entered into the records.

Pilot Lieutenant Gerald Stein and his

Captain Lorne "Duke" Reynolds was a hi-timer in both the B-25 and the P-61. He is seen here prior to a mission, wearing his flying gear and A-2 leather flight jacket emblazoned with the 426th Squadron patch. (Lorne Reynolds)

Radar Observer, Flight Officer James F. Rogers of the 426th flew one of the night intruder missions during this period from their base at Xi'an. The purpose was to seek and attack anything moving behind enemy lines and also monitor any unusual activity by the Japanese. Stein recalls: "We took off about 2 A.M. and flew up the Yellow River to the first railroad tracks and then we turned north and followed them for about 90 miles. When we passed low over a tower that sat next to the tracks we received some small-caliber machine gun fire. One of their rounds hit our 20mm center ammo belts exploding one of the high explosive shells directly under my pilot's seat! I radioed my R/O and he said there was no damage that he could detect, so we proceeded on to the north.

"A few minutes later, we observed some welding being done on a railroad bridge and I

Low-level strafing passes always drew a lot of small arms fire. This 426th squadron Black Widow received multiple hits in its wing while on a mission against Japanese ground troops. (Lewis Ober)

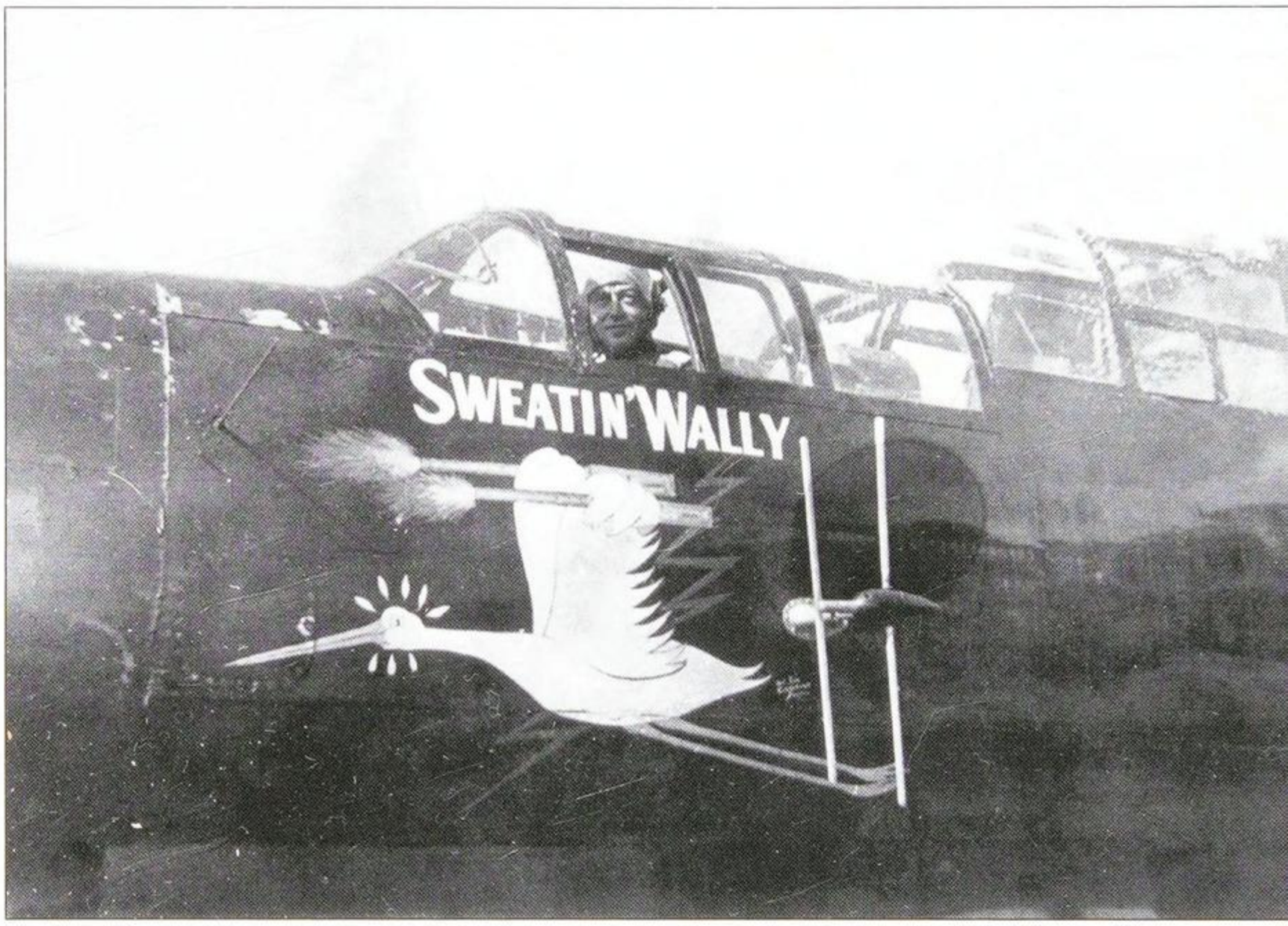
immediately dropped the nose and gave them a burst, but since we had no tracers, we couldn't tell if we hit anything important. We were so low going in that we almost took the cab off of the repair truck and it was so close, we could have been killed in the crash that would have followed. It was impossible to see it in the dark. A while later, we came on an east west-track and turned to follow it until the next north-south track, which we would use to head back to base. About 40 miles further down the tracks, we saw the headlight of a locomotive in the distance. We stayed down on the deck and pulled over to the left of the train to line up for a strafing run coming in from the right rear. Again, it was hard to tell if we were doing any damage because all we had were the armor piercing rounds but we could see sparks flying when they hit steel. As we roared over the top of the engine, Rogers stated that he saw steam spouting out the top of the engine, so we had evidently crippled it. By this time, we were getting low on fuel and the first rays of light were beginning to creep up on the horizon, so we headed for home."

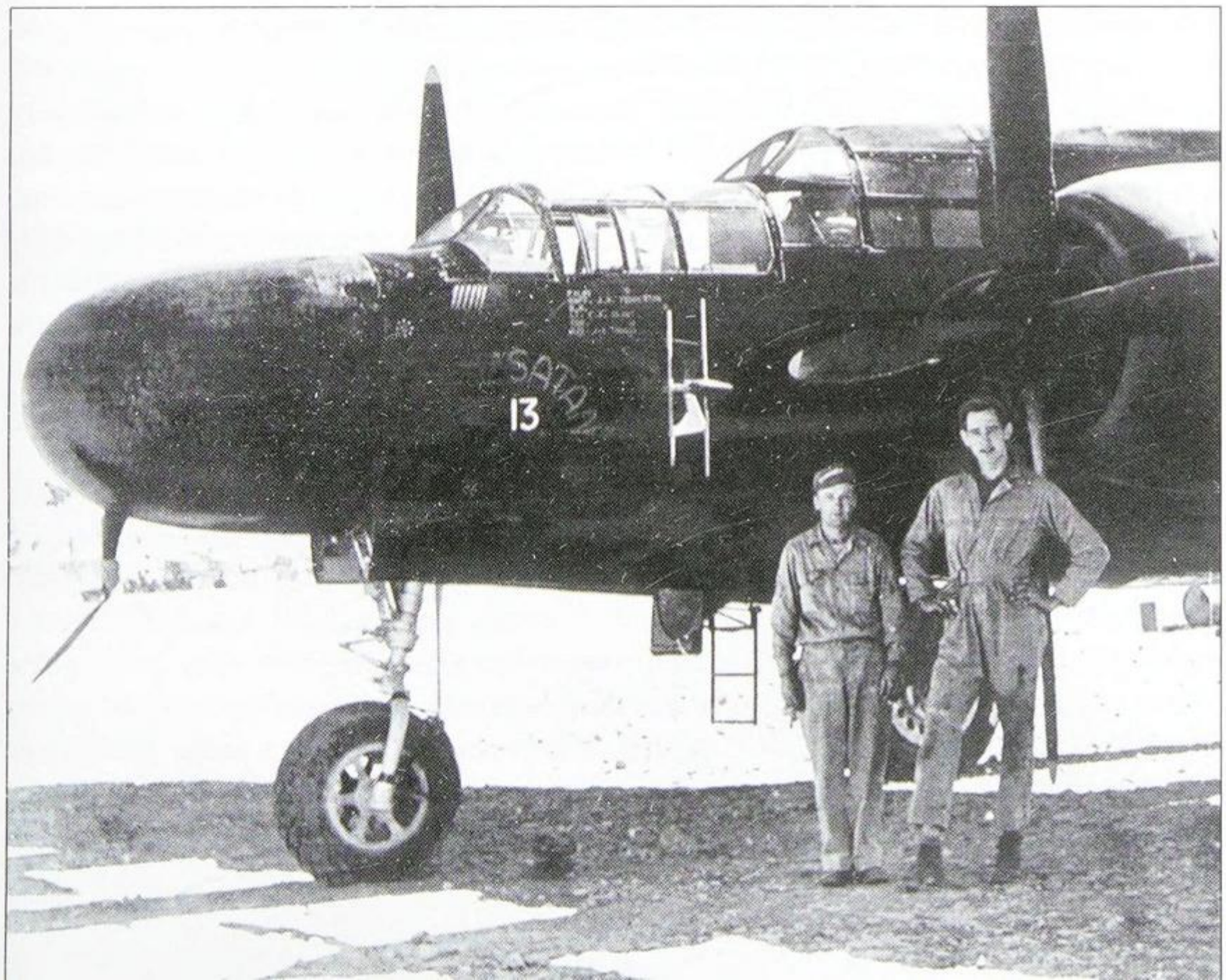
Making the final approach to the airfield, Lt. Stein glanced at his instrument panel and saw that the left engine cylinder head temperature was very high. When he pulled up into his parking slot, he jumped out and made a close inspection of his P-61 with his crew chief. They found one .25 caliber hole in the right drop tank, one hole in the gun bay which blew one of the ammo belts up and one hole in the left nacelle which went in and ripped fins from one lower cylinder barrel. Stein noted, "It was a good thing we had the ole dependable Pratt & Whitney Radials . . . (no liquid cooling)!"

The 427th continued with numerous day missions with P-51 Mustang escorts. Missions were flown this way for a reason. First of all, the Japanese had been known to have some fast fighters working in the area that the Black Widows were interdicting and the P-61, although highly maneuverable, would have a tough time getting out of the way of a swarm of Zero's in the daylight. The second reason was that the P-61 pilots and R/Os could get familiar with the terrain in the day which would help them when flying low- level night missions. The day sorties with escort proved to be very successful in that they shot up a lot of boxcars and parked trucks. Having a working knowledge of the rail system over a wide area, they knew what areas to work best at night. On the night of 10 March, two 427th Black Widows took off from their base at Kunming to hit a rail complex around Yiyang which also harbored a lot of river shipping. They caught several trains in the yard and were able to destroy 17 boxcars, damage many more and inflict damage on several locomotives. Buoyed by these successes, two more Black Widow crews were approved to make the long flight into Indochina to hit a big petroleum storage facility in the Hanoi/Haiphong area. Using the explosive 20mm rounds, they caused a lot of damage,

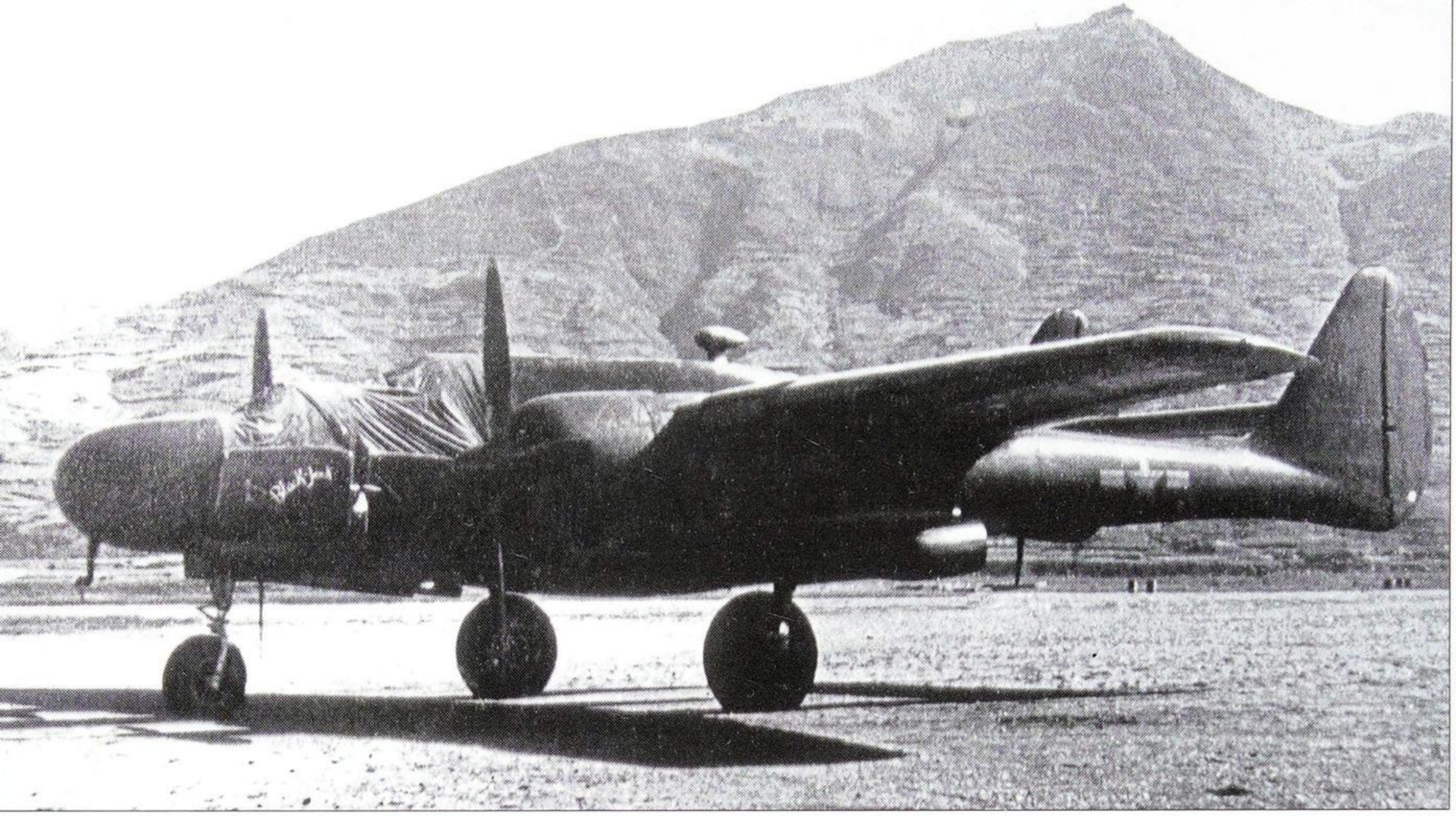
The air crew and crew chief for *Blood n' Guts* pose by their P-61 at Xi'an ("Hsian"), China, in the spring of 1945. Kill symbols stand for for enemy trucks destroyed. With fewer and fewer Japanese aircraft flying in their patrol area at night, the Black Widow air crews went after anything that was moving on the ground. Japanese ground forces were spread out over a large area and depended on trucks and trains for supplies. This air crew was one of the most successful in killing truck traffic. They also had good results in strafing the Sampans, loaded with munitions and supplies, that plied the numerous rivers in China. (Fred Johnson)

Captain Walter Storck is in the cockpit of *Sweatin' Wally* at one of the 427th's forward bases in China. The 427th did get in some lucrative intruder missions while operating from the forward airfields at Zhijiang ("Chihkiang"), Chengzhong ("Chengjung"), and Nanning. Japanese forces were already pulling back when news of the U.S. capture of Iwo Jima arrived in March. Japan was now within easy range of U.S. fighters. With heavy losses of trucks and locomotives, the enemy depended on an unlimited supply of Sampans. By early July, the squadron had destroyed 155 Sampans and damaged another 52, costly losses for the enemy. Many enemy warehouses, barges, and trucks were also knocked out. These successes were racked up while flying day and night missions combined. On 13 August 1945 (soon after the two Atomic bombs were dropped), the squadron moved back to the rear to await return to the U.S. and deactivation. (Fred Blanton)





Satan 13 was flown by the 426th Night Fighter Squadron out of Chengdu, China, in the spring of 1945. The aircraft was assigned to Captain John Pemberton. The Japanese efforts to fly at night were severely curtailed due to their lack of fuel. The 426th had heavily damaged or destroyed what few oil refineries there were within their extended flying range. Any efforts to ship fuel in from Japan met with disaster due to the number of American submarines and aircraft that were working the shipping lanes between Japan and China. Of the five kills made by the 426th, two of them came in January 1945 when the forward detachment, located at Laohekou ("Laohokow") in Hubei Province, were lucky enough to get in on a brief flurry of enemy air activity in that area. (Lewis Ober)



426th pilot Lieutenant Glen Jackson's *Black Jack* has been serviced after a long night's mission. A cover protects the Plexiglas from the hot sun during a spring day in Liangshan, China, in 1945. (Glen Jackson)

especially to Japanese fuel tanks in that area.

One of the most dangerous night missions flown by the 426th Squadron involved pilot Lt. Hubert Daniels and his R/O Flight Officer Norman Farber in late spring 1945. They were flying in a P-61B with orders to bomb targets of opportunity and fly offensive reconnaissance along a heavily used section of railroad. They stumbled onto some major rail traffic and inflicted some undetermined damage on it. One of their bombs hung up and failed to drop and they still had not shot all of their 20mm. It was the appearance of their aircraft that told the story of how close they came to being shot down. They had been hit numerous times by machine gun and small arms fire at the Yutze Rail Yards, resulting in a large number of holes in both wings, one boom, and in the ammo door. It was believed that they had come in so low that they clipped some electrical lines, probably strung on poles running parallel to the track. The lines tore off the antennas under both booms. A piece of wire had caught in the bomb shackle, tearing the electric wires loose. Most of their ammo had been spent trying to silence some flak towers.

In trying to piece together what actually happened, they determined that about five miles down the track, after the flak towers were strafed, they came in on a locomotive that was pulling 10 cars into a protected revetment. They made a strafing pass and it was at that time, that they probably hit the power lines by the track. They did disable the engine on that pass. When the bomb hung, they decided to head back to base. But, the story does not end there; four days after this mission, the same crew was returning from a mission and when they were climbing down from the aircraft, one of the 20mm guns accidentally discharged killing both the pilot and R/O and severely wounding the crew chief!

With B-29 operations going at full steam out of China, the pipeline for gasoline periodically ran short. In early April 1945, the 427th was ordered to cut back on some of their night intruder work due to a fuel shortage. There was also a rumor that the detachment that had been operating in Burma might be sent to join the detachment in China. This was good news because it would finally get the entire squadron in one place. At this same time, it was announced that 14th Air Force was going to move its operations exclusively into northern China, leaving the 10th Air Force to handle southern China. In late April, with a fresh supply of 4.5-inch rockets, the 427th sent two of its Black Widows on a night time attack against a known Japanese airfield. After multiple firing passes with their rockets, one of the "Sally" bombers was destroyed and several fighter types, all of which were supposed to be protected by revetments. The rockets found their mark. Before they pulled away from the attack, they sent several rockets into some barrack buildings close to the airfield. The pilots reported that they did not notice any ground fire on their passes.

Both squadrons were aware of heavy river traffic behind enemy lines and they sent some of their aircraft out at night to address this situation. Once again, the rockets hit home and several motorized Sampans were sunk. At that time, they became aware of numerous barges being used to transport heavy equipment toward the coast. The barges came under attack, with a few sinking and many others set furiously ablaze. There were a couple of missions where fast motor launches were encountered and they were not worth wasting a rocket on so they disappeared in a froth caused by 20mm rounds.

As late spring and early summer rolled around, the war was going well for the Allies and Japanese resistance in China had diminished considerably as many of their troops were being called back to Japan for the inevitable defense of the mainland. This moved the P-61 bases in China even closer to the enemy lines. During the month of June, 426th squadron records state that for that month, the squadron dropped 156 of the 100-pound GP bombs along with some 500-pounders. This was in addition to the 5,196 rounds of 20mm fired at close range against ground targets. These figures equated to

136 total combat hours in the air. Each of the unit's aircraft averaged 11 hours and 48 minutes of flight time. The most significant statistic was the fact they had destroyed six locomotives and killed a large number of troops. The former was significant because working engines were few and far between and they were the primary source for mass movement of material out of harm's way as they moved closer to the port cities and eventually return to Japan. The highest kill score on ground targets was registered by Captain Robert Scott and Lt. Craig Elrod when they were working the same area and ran into a zone full of lucrative targets. They destroyed four locomotives, ten trucks and three tanks. Even though experience and skill had a lot to do with that total, luck was also involved because they were constantly drawing small arms fire.

All of the fighter bombers flying the CBI regarded bridge busting as one of their top priorities; day or night. Some of the most sought after bridges spanned the Yellow River. Some of the 426th Detachments were partnered with the famous 7th Chinese-American Composite Wing (CACW). Lt. James Smith, the R/O on *Jing-Bow Joy-Ride* recalls an exciting mission in which he and Carl Absmeier went after the biggest bridge on that river. "We had enthusiastic cooperation from our Chinese mates, but the Nationalist forces were being beaten and were falling back in disorder, at this time. Capt. Absmeier came up with the idea of our bombing the bridge in the dead of night as it had been a strategically important target for 14th Air Force. There had been day strikes directed against it by both fighters and bombers without success and with heavy casualties being inflicted on our side. Intelligence told us that the Japanese were supposed to be defending that bridge with radar-controlled anti-aircraft guns and they were just as effective at night as they were in the daytime.

"This bridge was near Luoyang, which was 350 north of Laohekou and Absmeier wanted to hit it. I was not for it from the outset. I didn't think our aircraft, with four 500-pound GP bombs would be effective against it. I finally agreed to the mission. Chinese ordnance provided us with the bombs which we loaded onto external bomb racks along with extra fuel tanks which we also carried under the wings. We checked everything from the bomb releases, to gassing up and I pre-flighted the proposed navigation into the target and return and

Lieutenant William Humenick (left) and his Radar Observer Lieutenant George Mueller straddle the nose of their P-61 at a forward base in China. They flew numerous daylight search and destroy missions with rockets and bombs. Mission symbols are painted below the cockpit. (Bill Humenick)

then reviewing the actual contemplated attack. At the bridge, the Yellow River ran west to east and the bridge ran north to south. Our plan was to approach from the south at a very low altitude (under 300 feet), so as to stay off the Jap's radar. We calculated that when we were about 10 miles from the bridge, we would bounce up to 7,500 feet just long enough for me to get a radar fix on the bridge itself. Then heading directly for the bridge, we would dive back down to 200 feet, picking up speed for just one fast south-to-north bomb run along the length of the bridge. We had no equipment onboard for aiming or sighting the bombs into specific points on the bridge, but this attack along the length of it at such a low altitude would hopefully see all four bombs hit some part of it. After the drop, our plan was to continue north for 10 miles, then gradually swing westerly in a big arc to re-cross the Yellow River to the west and head back south to Laohekou."

Most well laid out plans seem to never go as expected and about one hour into the mission, they were following railroad tracks which were part of the navigational aids to the bridge. Suddenly, along came a train! At that time, trains were near the top of the priority list, ranking right behind destroying enemy aircraft in the air. Every fighter pilot knew that killing a locomotive was not an easy task because of the heavy boiler plate, machined steel

The initial orders for the 427th NFS issued on 10 July 1944 sent them from California to Cazes Air Base, Casablanca, with 12 P-61A-10s. They ended up flying combat in Burma and in China, where they are seen at one of their bases in the late spring of 1945. (Edward Woelfle)

On the ground in Nanning, China, in July 1945, this 427th Black Widow named *Cynthia Kay . . . Howe's About It* is loaded with rockets and long-range external fuel tanks for running the railroad tracks in search of trains. (Fred Blanton)

Jing Bow-Joy Ride awaits its crew at a forward base in China. The 426th Squadron pilot assigned to this Black Widow was Captain Carl Absmeier, who is credited with two kills. (Carl Absmeier)

Rocket tubes are seen here mounted on a 427th Squadron Black Widow. Both the 426th and 427th Squadrons became masters at air-to-ground missions because, as the war wound down, almost no enemy aircraft took to the sky at night in some areas. These Black Widows used the rocket tubes with great success, especially against trains and sampans. (Glen Jackson)

I'll Get By, **is a P-61A-10 assigned to the 426th NFS and flown by pilot Captain John J. Wilfong with his R/O Second Lieutenant Glenn Ashley. They were credited with one kill, which has already been noted below the cockpit. (Fred LeFever)**

and cast iron. The Chinese P-40's in the CACW, with only their .30 caliber guns couldn't inflict serious damage on one. The Mustangs, with their .50 caliber guns, faired better, but it was hard for them to confirm a locomotive kill. But, the ole P-61 had armor-piercing 20mm cannon and they could easily do the job. It was time for the crew of *Jing Bow-Joy Ride* to make a decision.

"All in a moment, the Yellow River Bridge was forgotten and we were nosed down in a long, low-level strafing run. Capt. Absmeier open fire while we were still at maximum range and held the trigger down continuously until the last split second, zooming abruptly up and away from the target. When I looked back, the locomotive was still moving, but it had broken in two. The middle of the engine was down on the tracks, making many sparks. The cowcatcher was pitched up in the air and the engineer's cab was pitched down. There was a mountain of steam that obscured things when the engine bumped to a stop, "

"We circled back to rake over the boxcars and we ran into sporadic ground fire. We ended up making three or four firing passes on the boxcars, scoring hits all over them, but there were no explosions as a result. We had done sufficient damage to the train and enemy ground fire had scored a few hits on our plane. This was the first time that being hit had been so loud. They were sudden, loud, ripping-crashing thuds, easily heard over the roar of our engines. We didn't particularly like it, but it was kind of like lightning and thunder . . . if you heard it, it had already missed you! Following standard procedure, we had dropped our belly tanks, still containing some fuel, before making our first pass. This ruled out the possibility of continuing on to the Yellow River. We did have plenty of fuel in our internal tanks to hunt for more targets of opportunity in this area. In minutes, we stumbled across a road and then another and finally an intersection with a large convoy of maybe ten trucks moving through. After several passes, we had most of them burning. A few exploded and they were evidently carrying ammunition. It proved to be a very good light show in the darkness. When we returned to base, with our bombs still intact, we counted about 15 bullet holes in our aircraft. We were lucky that none of the hits disabled our plane!"

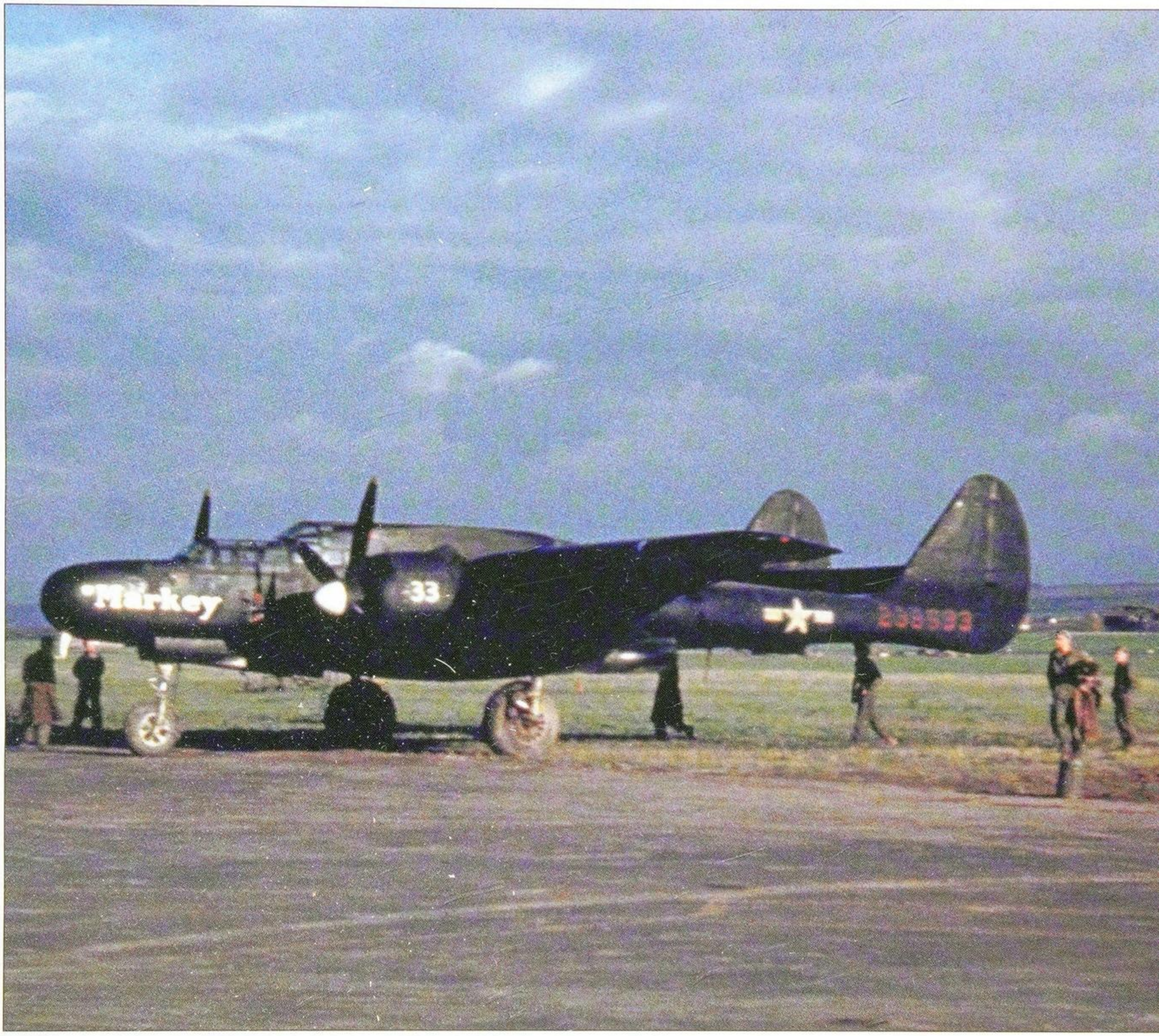
Lieutenant Lorne "Duke" Reynolds was a 426th NFS pilot who did a lengthy combat tour in the Black Widow. In January 1945, he was selected to fly a classified mission out of Xi'an Airbase for the OSS. At the time, he was ordered to keep the mission secret, but after 60+ years, it had probably been long de-classified. He recalls what happened. "My R/O and I took off on a cloudy day with low overcast for a destination northeast of the Yellow River deep into Japanese territory. We were to land in a small area held by the Chinese Communists right in the middle of enemy held territory. The conditions in this area were crude at best with no official landing strip available. Our landing zone was just a dirt road on top of a mesa and from the air; it looked shorter than hell with a drop of several hundred feet at each end. We were briefed that a fire would be lit on the ground if we were cleared to land. After we located the mesa, we saw the smoke from a fire, so I dropped the gear and flaps and made a near perfect short-field landing into the wind.

"There were no buildings or facilities on the ground or in sight. As we taxied in, all I saw was an old truck and three people. Coming to a stop, I dropped the hatch behind the pilot's seat and two Colonels climbed up into the forward compartment. I closed the hatch while one of them sat on the empty gunner's seat and the other right on top of the hatch and both of them shouted 'Let's go!' I never shut the engines down, so it was easy to get rolling again as I taxied down to the other end and turned into the wind, dropped my flaps again and gave those P&W R2800s full throttle. Using the entire length of the road, I just barely cleared the end as we got airborne. Our destination was Chengdu without any conversation the entire flight. We let those two birds off at A-2 which was the main B-29 Superfortress base, located only 10 minutes away from our base. We did what was required of us and I have often wondered who these two Colonels were and what they were doing at such a remote location. On top of that, who was the third guy sitting in the truck and why the hush-hush of the mission? More than likely, it had something to do with information about B-29 operations from that base and the intelligence was probably provided by the Communist forces that were also fighting the Japanese. On this mission, the advertised short field landing and takeoff characteristics of the P-61 performed just as we had been told."

When the war in the Pacific ended with the Atomic Bombs on mainland Japan, the 426th and 427th were set to ship home almost immediately. The 427th was inactivated on 29 October and the 426th was officially inactivated on 5 November 1945.

The only aerial kills recorded by these squadrons went to the 426th, with five confirmed. The 427th was never in a position to intercept enemy aircraft, so it excelled in the air-to-ground role.

The Mediterranean Theater



***Markey,* a P-61B-6 assigned to the 417th NFS during the final weeks of the war, sits on the edge of a field in Saint-Dizier, France, in May 1945. (Jack Woolner)**

For night fighters, the Mediterranean Theater of Operations (MTO) was unique, especially in terms of recording the exploits of the P-61 Black Widow. Four American night fighter squadrons were involved in the theater: the 414th, 415th, 416th, and 417th squadrons. Beginning in such places as al-Sâniyah (La Sénia) and Ṭafrâwî (Tafaraoui), in Algeria; Binzart (Bizerte) in Tunisia; and Elmas, in Sardinia; these four squadrons cut their teeth during the early fighting in North Africa. The problem was that this was in 1943, long before the Black Widow became operational. The squadrons were initially equipped with British fighters; the Bristol Beaufighter and the DeHavilland Mosquito. During the summer of 1943, the RAF released 100 Beaufighters to equip U.S. night fighter units in North Africa. The aircraft were split between the squadrons and they immediately began flying daytime convoy escort sorties and numerous ground attack operations. These were not the type of mission that the air crews had specifically trained for, but in a short period of time, all four squadrons began conducting nighttime defensive air patrols. The Allied successes in North Africa forced the Germans to pull back across the Mediterranean Sea into southern France and Italy. This German retreat provided some good opportunities for U.S. night kills over the water.

By the early fall of 1943, British production of the new Mosquitos allowed the RAF to convert more of its Beaufighter units to the new De Havilland fighters, thus releasing many replacement Beaus for use by the Americans as they moved their forward bases up into Corsica and Italy. Before transitioning to the P-61, the 414th Squadron used its Beaufighter Mk VIs to score eight confirmed kills of German aircraft. It also received credit for one probable and one

Two of the first P-61s received by the 417th NFS are parked out in a grassy area at their base at Saint-Dizier, France in early April 1945. (Richard Ziebart)

damaged. The squadron moved to several bases as territory held by the Germans continued to shrink. Their last base in the Beaufighter was at Pisa, Italy, and when they moved to Pontedera, in late November 1944, it was to trade in their Beaufighters for the new Black Widows. They would finish the war at this base even though they had a major detachment working with the ETO's 422nd Night Fighter Squadron out of Florennes, Belgium. Of the four American nocturnal units in the MTO, the 414th would end up having the highest total kill score, with 13 enemy aircraft shot down with one each in the probable/damage category.

The 415th Night Fighter Squadron recorded the highest number of aerial kills in the Beaufighter with eleven. In addition to the total destroyed, they had five probables and one damage. They were the squadron to beat while based out of Cassibile and Cantania, Sicily in the early fall and winter of 1943. Their first base in Italy was at Montecorvino in late November 1943. From there, they moved to several bases in Italy before receiving new orders to move the squadron onto French soil at Le Vallon.

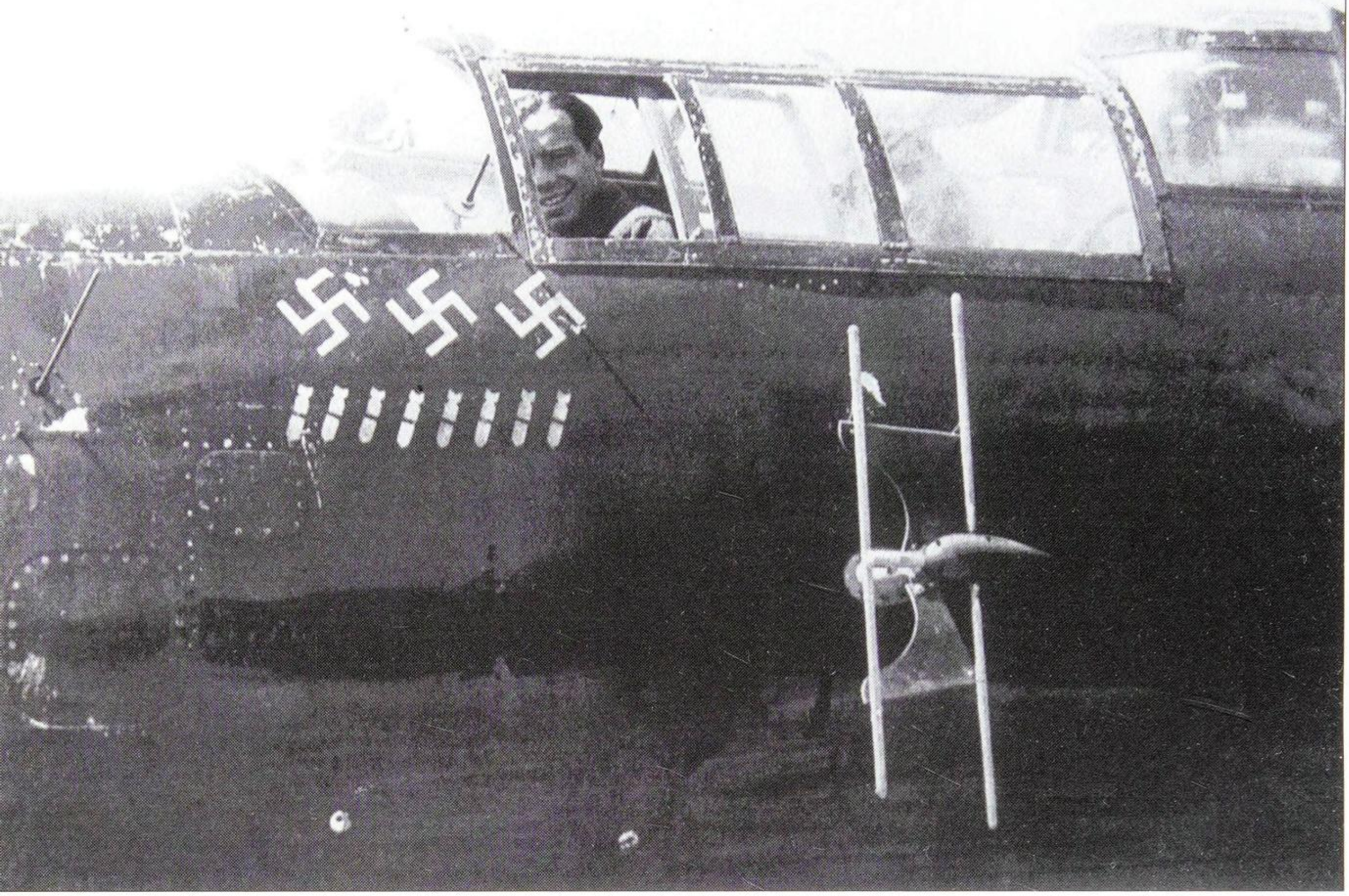
Official records show that the 415th received its first P-61s on 20 March 1945 while based at Saint-Dizier (A-64), France. By this time, the war had wound down to the extent that very few German aircraft were flying (day or night). The squadron quickly moved into nighttime interdiction and intruder type missions carrying ordnance. When they flew their first mission in the P-61, the war was less than two months from coming to an end.

The third squadron to fly the night missions in the MTO was the 416th. This unit was also unique in that it started out flying the Beaufighter and sometime in 1944, it moved over to the British Mosquito Mk 30. By this time, the number of German aircraft

With three kills, Captain Albert L. Jones was one of the top shooters in the Mediterranean. One of his kills was made while flying the Beaufighter prior to the squadron's transition into the new P-61s. Jones would go on to become one of Boeing's top test pilots before retiring. (Al Jones)

Radar Observer Lieutenant John Rudovsky (left) and his pilot Captain Al Jones pose in their P-61 at Pontedera, Italy, in the spring of 1945. This air crew was credited with three kills while flying with the 414th NFS. (Al Jones)

Lieutenant Al Moore is the pilot assigned to *Li'l Abner* while flying with the 415th NFS, a unit that received its first P-61s only on 20 March 1945. The 415th had no kills in the P-61, since there was very little opportunity to engage German night-flying aircraft, but the squadron did get in some good air-to-ground missions. (Al Moore)



Captain Al Jones returns from a day mission over Germany at war's end. He was the top shooter in the P-61 in the MTO. His 414th Squadron was fortunate to receive some Black Widows in time to send a detachment up to Belgium during the Battle of the Bulge. All three of his kills (one of which was in a Beaufighter) are included on his P-61. (Al Jones)

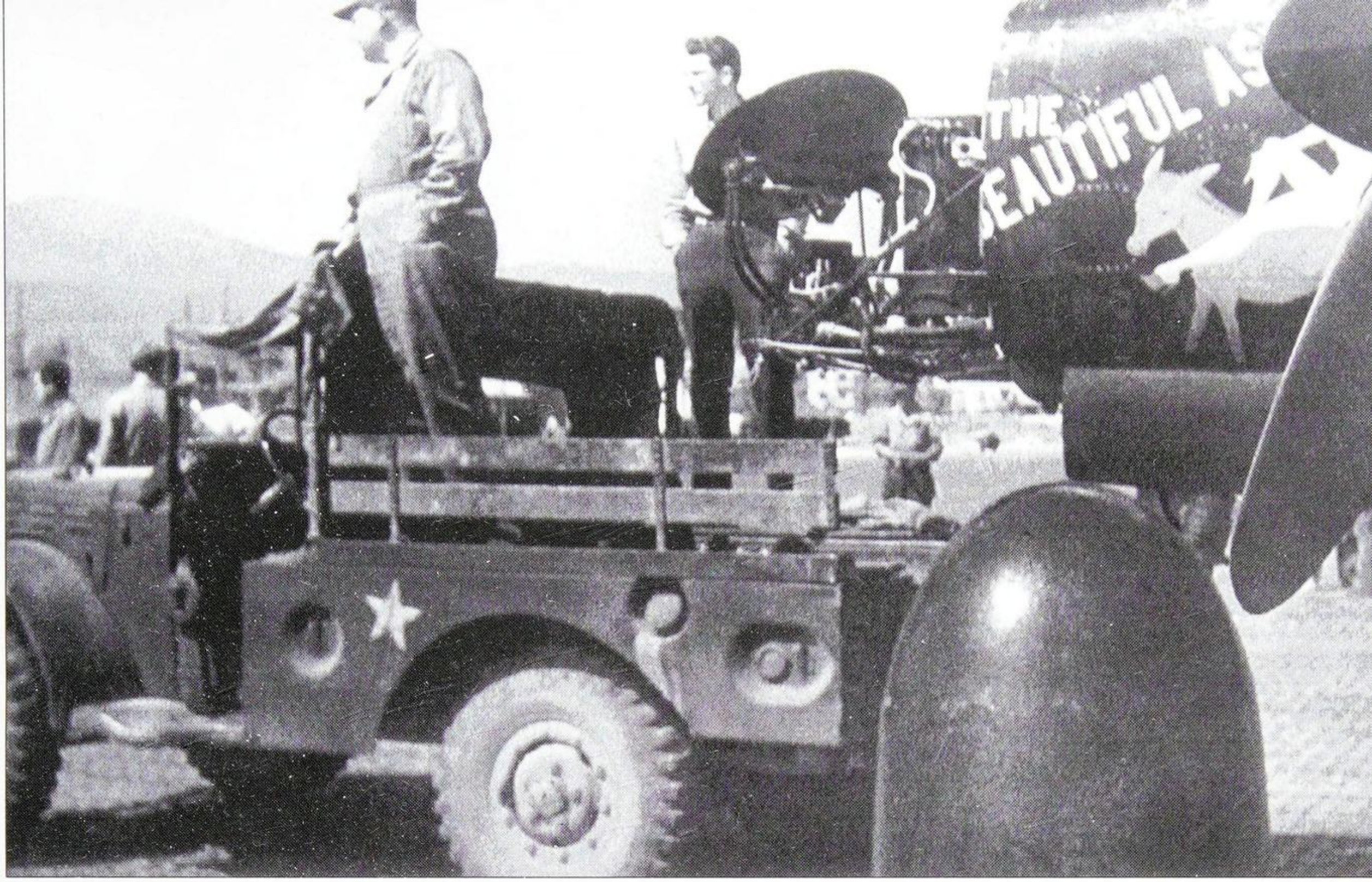
flying at night had dwindled and the squadron only got credit for one kill in the Mossie while it had earlier racked up four kills in the Beaufighter. Unfortunately, the 416th never had a chance to see what it could do in the new P-61s because it did not receive their first one until 3 June 1945 and the war in Europe had already ended. Squadron officer Captain John Robinson stated that on June 1st they were told that they would no longer fly the Mosquito on training flights and instruction would begin immediately on the P-61. However, the squadron would be one of the main all-weather squadrons to pull occupation duty in Europe, based out of Hörsching, Austria. All of this assignment would be carried out in the Black Widows. During its combat tour, however, the 416th was officially credited with five kills, two probables, and one damaged.

The fourth of the American night fighter squadrons in theater was the 417th. They entered combat in North Africa (Algeria) in the summer of 1943 with the Bristol Beaufighter. Their next base, as they moved up, was on Corsica followed four months later with a move into France. Their sister squadron, the 415th, also moved into Le Vallon, France, less than two weeks before the 417th. There were plenty of air-to-ground missions for both squadrons to do.

Although the 414th Squadron got five kills in the P-61, night hunting for enemy aircraft met with less than desired results because the Luftwaffe had lost so many aircraft that it was not worth the risk to fly. There was limited activity usually over the front lines and then back into their own territory. Nighttime offensive action against Allied positions was very rare. The flurry of attacks witnessed during the Battle of the Bulge was a last-ditch effort to turn the war around and it failed dismally. The squadron was very fortunate to receive its P-61s before the other MTO units and some of its air crews were able to get in on the Battle of the Bulge when a detachment was sent up from Pontedera, Italy, to Belgium to work with the high-scoring 422nd NFS. The move gave them a chance to get in some kills before things started to dry up. As aerial targets disappeared, the P-61's killing potential would have to be utilized against ground targets. Of these, locomotives were the most desirable.

Captain Joe Jenkins recalls a night intruder mission he flew in his Black Widow named *First Nighter*. "The area we were working was around Cologne. The winter weather was still unpredictable, as was to be expected in February. After some time into the mission, we spotted a locomotive pulling a lot of box cars. My first priority was to stop the engine, so I began my strafing passes from the front of the column. My 20mm did a lot of damage to the engine, which brought the train to a stop. Then, my following passes raked the cars along the entire length of the train. The ground fire we were getting was light and I believe this was due to the fact that there was no moon and the ground was covered with a thin haze which would have hampered the gunners in trying to track us.

"We still had some time to go to finish our patrol, so we kept our eyes glued on any movement on the ground. Some time later, we located two more freight trains just a few miles from Cologne and



Using one of the squadron's utility trucks as a work stand has made it easier for these radar technicians to repair this SCR-720 on *The Beautiful Ass*, parked on the 414th flight iine at Pontedera, Italy. (Ken Bronson)

they were headed in that direction I strafed both with my 20mm with a night vision camera to record the event. After about two and observed good results. We were given credit for one locomotive destroyed and one damaged with 15 box cars destroyed. It had been a very productive mission. While we were airborne that night, the RAF sent a big formation of bombers over and hit Cologne. Needless to say, there were many searchlights and a tremendous amount of anti-aircraft fire. We stayed out on the perimeter and observed the event for just a short while before moving out further in search of more trains. But, from the time the bombers hit, we probably took more evasive action that we had ever taken at the lower altitudes. On the way back to our base in Belgium, we followed some tracks without seeing any movement, so I fired a long burst into the tracks, hoping to do some damage. Unfortunately, after a short burst, we ran out of ammo. We arrived safely at our base and considered it a very productive mission."

The 414th Night Fighter Squadron had been very active especially since receiving its P-61s. It was the first squadron of the four in the Mediterranean to get the new night fighter. Once the feeding frenzy that occurred in Belgium in December 1944-January 1945 had subsided, night flying by the Luftwaffe had slimmed down to almost zero especially for 414th aircraft operating from Pontedera, Italy. The squadron's top scoring combination of pilot Captain Al Jones and his R/O Lt. John "Lefty" Rudovsky were still busy in February 1945 as part of the squadron's detachment sent up to Florennes, Belgium. Captain Jones relates some stories about a mission they flew that February.

"One night Lieutenant 'Lefty' Rudovsky and I were scheduled for a combination night patrol and intruder mission from our base at Florennes. The 9th Air Force wanted to make a documentary film of a typical night fighter mission and assigned a combat photographer with a night vision camera to record the event. After about two hours of patrol without any significant action, we were released by GCI to enter German airspace to conduct a search for truck and rail activity. The day fighters were doing such a good job of eliminating ground transportation, the Germans were moving most of their supply requirements at night. Our job was to try and stop this effort by flying at about 1,000 feet above the Autobahn and railroad tracks looking for anything moving. Our P-61 was equipped with four 20mm, four .50-caliber machine guns and two 500-pound GP bombs. We spotted a few trucks and destroyed them quickly with our guns and when we spotted some tracks, we followed them heading deeper into Germany. By this time, we were fairly close to Berlin and we still had our bombs.

"We did a 180-degree turn and headed back down the tracks. It didn't take long to spot a train pulling about 15 cars which provided us an excellent chance to get rid of our bombs. I put our P-61 into a shallow dive at about 250 knots and when we were down to about 250 feet, I hit the bomb release and as I passed over the locomotive, I pulled up and looked back. There was no explosion. I thought I had not made a proper bomb release and decided to make another pass on the train which I hesitated to do because the flak gunners would be alerted from my first pass. At any rate, I went ahead and made the pass, however, the results were the same and this time we ran into some intense anti-aircraft fire.

"I was puzzled as to why the bombs didn't explode but our mission time was almost up so we headed for Florennes. We entered the pattern at our base and came in for a normal landing when 'Lefty' called out over the intercom: 'Get off the runway quick, the bomb's out there!' I immediately advanced the throttles and we made a go-around. I found out upon landing that a bomb had

Most of the P-61s that were assigned post-war duties in Germany and Austria were the "B" models. This view of a P-61B cockpit was taken at war's end when the 417th NFS was standing down from combat air patrols. (James Van Voorhis)

fallen off our plane on touchdown and had followed us down the runway. It didn't explode because armament had neglected to pull the safety pins and as a result, the bomb that was dropped on the locomotive didn't explode which probably saved the lives of those in the train's cab. The bomb that dropped on the runway and didn't explode probably saved our lives also. Needless to say, we thanked the guys in the armament section!"

Very few Black Widow pilots or Radar Observers kept a detailed diary on their missions. Lt. John Rudovsky, of the 414th, was the exception and most of his missions were flown with his assigned pilot Captain Al Jones. It allowed one to get a glimpse into what the average Black Widow crew was involved in every time they flew a night mission and even when they started carrying bombs on daylight missions. There was a lot more to the above mission recounted by Captain Al Jones concerning the hung bomb, and Lt. Rudovsky expands on that mission flown on 22 February 1945.

"When we briefed for this mission, we were told that an Army photographer would be flying it with us as he wanted to document a typical night mission that the P-61 crews were flying. Well, he got to fly with us and he got way more than he had bargained for! We took off from our base in Belgium on time and crossed over the Rhine River. A short while into the mission, we spotted a large building that appeared to be some type of a factory. According to our briefing from Intelligence, it was probably a synthetic petroleum plant. We zeroed in on it and made a firing pass with our 20mm and as we pulled out, the building exploded and burned, so whatever was in there was very flammable.

"So much for the start of the mission, so we proceeded to fly further north and without warning, we found ourselves in the middle of a balloon barrage! According to the latest Intel reports, it wasn't supposed to be there, so we found out about it the hard way and fortunately, Jones maneuvered through them and into the clear and the photographer got some good pictures. A few minutes after going through this, our cockpit heater caught on fire, but we were able to extinguish it without doing much damage. Once this problem was out of the way, we dropped down to a very low altitude in search of any movement on the roads or rails.

"Just as we figured, a truck popped up ahead and we gave him a short burst and those 20mm lit it up into a ball of fire, so it must have been carrying some ammo or we hit its fuel tank. We continued the patrol by following railroad tracks and it didn't take long to run up on a locomotive pulling some boxcars. This time, we opened up with all eight guns and knocked the engine out and we kept on flying above the tracks until we came on a much bigger train and this time we almost got shot down!

"As we lined it up and came in for a firing pass, the flak opened up on us and it was so heavy and accurate that some of the tracers were coming up between my R/O compartment and the tail booms.

414th Squadron electricians install the wiring and antennae for the "Tail Warning" device on the left vertical stabilizer of a Black Widow. (Ken Bronson)

Lieutenant James Van Voorhis poses by his P-61 at a base in Germany just days before the war in Europe ended. The 417th Squadron's first base in Germany was at Giebelstadt. Van Voorhis joined the squadron after it had converted from Beaufighters to the new Black Widows. (James Van Voorhis)

Some of the 414th Squadron Black Widows displayed some very good nose art. This pin-up clad P-61 didn't have the opportunity to get any night kills but had flown numerous night time bombing missions against ground target. (Joe Jenkins)

It unnerved me because if there had been a split second difference in our speed, the rounds would have come right up through the bottom of my seat! This was the same mission that we had the hung bomb on and I believe Captain Jones has pretty well described how close we came on that one."

The 416th Night Fighter Squadron was on the short end of the stick when the Air Corps equipped the four squadrons operating in the MTO. The 416th did not receive their Black Widows until sometime in June 1945, after the end of the war in Europe, and therefore most of their experiences in that aircraft were during the postwar period. The squadron was based at Pontedera, Italy, when they received their first P-61. However, they started out in the war flying the Beaufighters and then converted over to the British Mosquito (Mossie).

Some air crews had been called up to a base at Dijon, France, to help out with the German surge during the Battle of the Bulge. While pulling that duty, one of their senior Radar Observers had the opportunity to fly some missions in the P-61 Black Widows belonging to their sister squadron, the 414th.

Lieutenant Earl R. Dickey was that R/O and he relates an unusual sort of mission that was experienced by very few other P-61 crews, if any. His Black Widow tangled with a night-flying German Me-262 jet fighter. "I was not expecting to witness what was in store for me on this particular night. While flying a patrol, we were vectored by GCI toward a bogey that was flying at an unusually high rate of speed while doing some sharp evasive turns. We managed to close somewhat and it was obvious that the pilot was not aware that we were in pursuit. The target blip on my scope was clear (both azimuth and elevation) as was the range. We turned in behind him quite some distance away. We had to continually increase the power settings on our P-61 engines to keep from dropping too far behind him. Finally, at absolute maximum cruise power, we were able to match his speed, but not gain on him."

"After observing the casual, curving flight path of the intruder, I asked my pilot to take up a southerly heading and hold it, so we could close in on him by flying a straight path in the general direction he was headed. We were flying at slightly higher altitude than the fast mover (10,000 feet as I recall). Sure enough, we were able to close slowly on him and still keep it from leaving my scope. His altitude was fairly constant. We closed to within a mile without incident. The weather was hazy and he wasn't running any lights so we had no chance for a visual at that distance. Slowly we moved up until we were within our 20mm range. We still didn't have a positive identification, but we had agreed with GCI to fire on the bogey even without a positive.

"Right before we fired, we saw two bright lights pop on amazingly close in front of us. They were like two acetylene torches as the bogey's afterburners kicked in. From that second on, he pulled away from us as if we were standing still! On my scope, it chandelled right and climbed out of range and off the scope. The two spouts of flame got smaller and smaller and disappeared out of sight. We were later informed that we had gotten close enough to trigger the Me 262's tail warning system thought to have been recently installed into the jet. We know we were within range of our 20mm and if we had just had a couple of seconds more, we might have been the only night fighter crew to bag a German jet!"

World War II Black Widow Squadrons

European Theater (ETO)

422nd Night Fighter Squadron
Activated: 1 August 1943
Received first P-61 on 23 May 1944
Total aerial kills: 43 manned aircraft
5 V-1 Buzz Bombs
First Squadron kill: 16 July 1944 (V-1)
Served with 9th Air Force

425th Night Fighter Squadron
Activated: 1 December 1943
Received first P-61 on 15 June 1944
Total aerial kills: 10 manned aircraft
4 V-1 Buzz Bombs
First Squadron kill: 5 August 1944 (V-1)
Served with 9th Air Force

Pacific Theater (PTO)

6th Night Fighter Squadron
Activated: 18 January 1943
Received first P-61 on 1 May 1944
Total aerial kills in the P-61: 16
First Squadron kill in P-61: 20 June 1944
Served with 7th Air Force

418th Night Fighter Squadron
Activated: 1 April 1943
Received first P-61 on 5 September 1944
Total aerial kills in the P-61: 18
First squadron kill in P-61: 7 October 1944
Served with 5th Air Force

419th Night Fighter Squadron
Activated: 1 April 1943
Received first P-61 on 3 May 1944
Total aerial kills in P-61: 5
First squadron kill in P-61: 5 August 1944
Served with 13th Air Force

421st Night Fighter Squadron
Activated: 1 May 1943
Received first P-61 on 1 June 1944
Total aerial kills in P-61: 13
First squadron kill in P-61: 7 July 1944
Served with 5th Air Force

426th Night Fighter Squadron
Activated: 1 January 1944
Received first P-61 on 25 September 1944
Total aerial kills in P-61: 5
First squadron kill in P-61: 29 October 1944
Served in 14th Air Force

547th Night Fighter Squadron
Activated: 1 March 1944
Received first P-61 on 7 October 1944
Total aerial kills in P-61: 6
First squadron kill in P-61: 25 December 1944
Served with 5th Air Force

548th Night Fighter Squadron
Activated: 10 April 1944
Received first P-61 in mid-September 1944
Total Aerial kills in P-61: 5
First squadron kill in P-61: 22 June 1945
Served in 7th Air Force

549th Night Fighter Squadron
Activated: 1 May 1944
Received first P-61 in October 1944
Total aerial kills in P-61: 1
First squadron kill in P-61; 23 June 1945
Served in 7th Air Force

550th Night Fighter Squadron
Activated: 1 June 1944
Received first P-61 on 6 January 1945
Total aerial kills in P-61: 0
Served in 13th Air Force

China-Burma-India (CBI)

427th Night Fighter Squadron
Activated: 1 February 1944
Received first P-61 on 15 August 1944
Total aerial kills in P-61: 0
Served in 10th and 14th Air Force

Mediterranean (MTO)

414th Night Fighter Squadron**
Activated: 26 January 1943
Received first P-61 on 20 December 1944
Total aerial kills in P-61: 5
First squadron kill in P-61: 4 February 1945
Served in 12th Air Force

415th Night Fighter Squadron**
Activated: 10 February 1944
Received first P-61 on 20 March 1945
Total aerial kills in P-61: 0
Served in 12th Air Force

416th Night Fighter Squadron**
Activated: 20 February 1943
Received first P-61 in June 1945
Total aerial kills in P-61: 0
Served in 12th Air Force

417th Night Fighter Squadron**
Activated: 20 February 1943
Received first P-61 in April/May 1945
Total aerial kills in P-61: 0
Served in 12th Air Force

**Most of their combat time was in Beaufighters

Black Widow Kills

European Theater of Operation (ETO)	53 (manned aircraft)
	9 (V-1 Buzz Bombs)
Pacific Theater of Operation (PTO)	64
China-Burma-India Theater of Operation (CBI)	5
Mediterranean Theater of Operation (MTO)	5
Total WWII Kills (All Theaters)	**127 (manned aircraft)**
	9 (V-1 Buzz Bombs)

All eight of the Black Widow's guns light up the night. Armed with four .50 caliber machine guns and four 20mm cannons, it could down any German or Japanese aircraft.

Don Greer 2009

ISBN 978-0-89747-638-6

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P7-ACS-330

Squadron Signal® Publications